対魔導学園35試験小隊

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"

柳実冬貴

13.暁の約束

ファンタジア文庫

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon" 対魔導学園 35 試験小隊

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Written by YANAGIMI Touki (柳実冬貴)

Illustrator by Kippu (切符)

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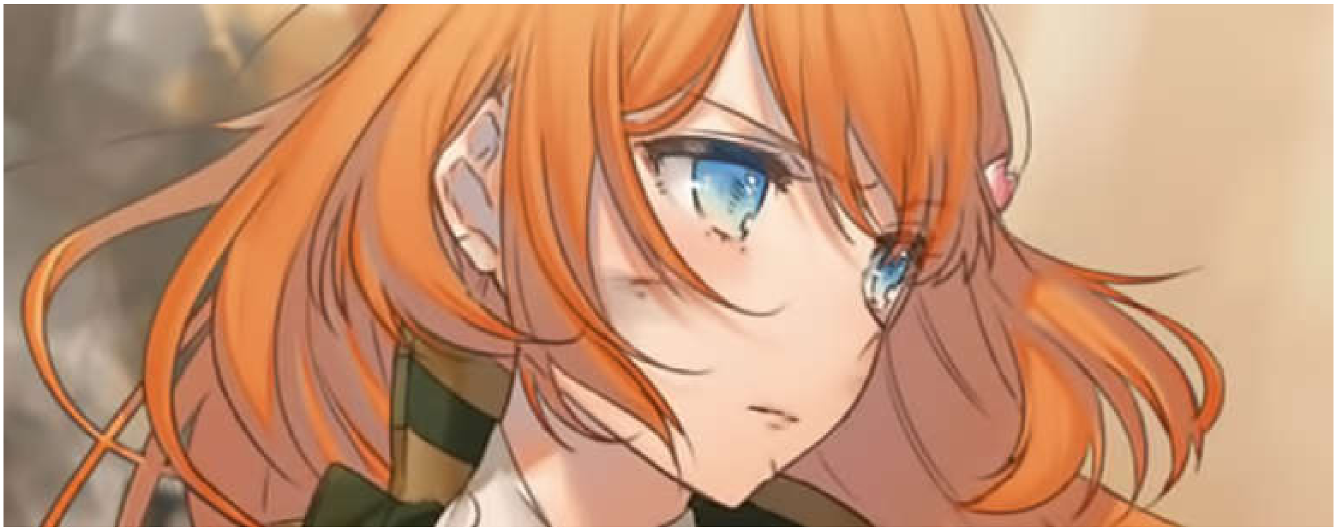

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AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"

13.Eternal promise

The 35th Test Platoon

Takeru Kusanagi, Ouka Otori,
Ikaruga Suginami, Usagi Saionji,
Mari Nikaido and Lapis

Prologue

——After letting go of the sword dripping with blood, Kusanagi Takeru looked up at the blue sky.

The day has risen long ago.

Outside was being baked in heat and the odor of vegetation tickling his nose was uncomfortable.

Something on the ground was smelling of iron.

It was a girl with very white skin and black hair.

A girl he has raised his hand upon.

Just recently he has learned that she was his little sister. After learning that the girl of Kusanagi harboring demons was his little sister he was both happy, and sad.

For the first time in his life he felt he needed someone else. An existence he wanted to have beside him.

And yet——he ended up killing her.

"...Why?"

He asked himself. Why did you kill her? If the girl who accumulated demon curse over long years is released, demons shall spread all over the world. That's why she has to be killed. That's what his father said.

That's why you have to choose, his father said.

This was the result of his choice. A body right in front of him.

Why?

For his parents?

Wrong.

For himself?

Wrong.

For the world?

Definitely not.

Then for what sake?

『"Kill Kiseki."』

"…………"

Tears spilled from Takeru's pupils as he looked at the sky. He killed her for her own sake. For her, who was sneered at, feared and hurt by the world, and yet endured all alone.

For her sake Takeru had become lonely.

Falling onto his knees, he smashed his both hands into the ground.

Tears fell onto the dry earth one after another.

"Dammit… as if I could bear this burden…"

Inside of Takeru overflowed with anger.

Why did this happen. Why did this happen. Why did this happen. Why did this happen.

There's no way this is a good end. This isn't what I want.

Stop screwing with me. Stop screwing with me damn it. This shit just can't be.

Feeling loneliness for the first time since being born, Takeru was bewildered.

He looked around seeking help.

"Why… am I in a place like this all alone?"

The feeling of discomfort from hurting his little sister and the fact he was despairing all alone lacked sense of reality.

His parents died. He killed his little sister. But other than that he had something else, something, many things precious to him…

Where have they gone? What was it, and who was it?

"——No."

I don't like this. My parents are dead, my little sister is dead, people precious to me aren't by my side. I hate this. I hate being alone.

Takeru approached the girl who didn't breathe and pressed against her chest with all his strength. Putting his entire body's weight on his arm, he pounded the girl's chest.

"Don't die…! You can't! Wake up…! I want you to remain by my side…!"

Breathing roughly, Takeru desperately tried to resuscitate the girl.

He already pierced her heart with his blade. But despite knowing it's pointless, he did not stop.

"Don't leave me alone…"

It was as if his basic feelings were revealed. Not knowing human hearts he always distanced himself from others, but now that he has become lonely he realized just how much he needs others. And just how selfish he was. That's why he wanted his little sister to live. That's why he sought the existences who disappeared even from his memories. All of it was his means of escaping loneliness.

His tears spilled. For such self-centered desire he didn't want his little sister to die. How sly and cunning, how hideous. In the end, in his desire to save his little sister, the thought of doing it "for her sake" was merely a pretext.

Selfish, self-centered. Exactly that. So what... whether it's past or the future, he intended to come clean with it someday. But seeing reality in front of him, he could only be disgusted at how despicable he was. The fact that despite killing his little sister, he goes wallowing just how much he hates it, and how much he doesn't want to give up, felt so disgusting that it felt nauseating.

This was Kusanagi Takeru's real nature.

"............ugh."

No matter how much he tried to resuscitate her, his little sister did not wake up. He was unable to recognize her face too well, but he was certain that she was at peace.

Death was his little sister's wish. He granted her this wish.

Takeru's sweat-covered face was twisted with resignation.

——If you realize just how despicable you are, instead of acting sissy he might as well act proud about it.

He heard a voice in his head.

——You did well as a brother. You have saved you little sister from the vortex of suffering. That's much better than acting selfish, not wanting either your little sister die, or die yourself.

This voice calmed Takeru's fury.

——This is the result everyone wanted. Thanks to you, your little sister won't hurt anyone and will sleep without being hurt either.

This voice did not soothe him. It was tempting him.

——You aren't at fault. What's at fault is what forced this suffering on you and your little sister, this world itself. Rather than hating yourself, hate this world.

——Destroy it, this world——you will kill this world's God.

"............"

Takeru hung his head and relaxed his muscles. He felt like entrusting his heart to the voice.

Heartbroken, Takeru had no strength to resist the voice nor he had any reason to. His little sister was in death's comfortable embrace, out of his reach. People who supported him didn't exist right from the start.

It's fine, isn't it.

There was no need to remain lonely, was there. There was no need to remain alive. If he unleashes his hatred towards the world, he'll feel better. Once he breaks everything and all, there'll be nothing to...

"...ha-haha..."

Laughter leaked out of Takeru's mouth.

His heart broke and he already gave up.

But, for some reason. For some reason Takeru's arms attempting to revive his little sister did not stop. He shouldn't have any strength left, but his body kept moving.

Why did he so miserably, so brazenly, so unsightly struggled? He granted his sister what she wished for, so why take this peace away from her?

He questioned himself. He questioned his memory.

Remember. Remember the reason why is this body not giving up.

"...I feel like... I was told something by someone... I don't know when was it... I can't recall."

A voice leaked from his dry lips.

"Someone allowed my... wretchedness..."

Along with tears, a voice has come out deep from inside his soul.

"Someone somewhere... is affirming... my selfishness..."

He hit his little sister's chest. As long as he had strength, there was hope.

With his own desire. With his own selfish ego.

"That 's why I... can't stop my hands..."

The warmth of hands pushing his back was revived.

Even if he had no memory of it, a warmth of embrace shook his soul.

"No matter how pathetic, miserable, disgusting, nauseating I am... I..."

I can't betray that warmth.

That's why——

"I need to be proud of myself as I am."

With his tears flowing without end, Takeru continued to press on his little sister's chest.

The pain of forcing his way through with his ego was much harsher than pretty words and just arguments. It was more painful than settling for easy results. Believing in his own ego had immeasurable difficulty. Takeru wasn't so strong. In fact, he was a lump of self-loathing.

Someone said.

Don't think awareness is an excuse, he said.

Someone said.

You being aware of it makes it even worse.

That was exactly right. That's why even while being ready to vomit, Takeru continued to question himself as he forced his way through. Crying miserably, intoxicated with himself, he moved his body.

So that one day, he could really be proud of himself. In order not to be alone. In order to reject loneliness. And to be together with people precious to him.

In order to regain all that he holds dear.

"I guess, I'm a fucking bastard... even if I say so myself..."

While mocking himself, Takeru continued to struggle. His little sister's body grew cold and hard like stone, but he did not give up.

He felt so sad his tears wouldn't stop. There was not enough hope for a droplet of tears, he couldn't help but to hate himself for being unable to stop.

It was so lonely to be alone, that he couldn't stand it.

"Uu-unn... nngh..."

Takeru struggled desperately trying to recall someone's warmth.

How many months have passed. A minute, an hour, a day, it felt even like a year. Takeru continued to try reviving his little sister.

Even if summer passes, and fall had comes, vegetation withers and winter comes, and then spring comes along with fresh sprouts.

Even if his little sister's body rots and all that's left are bones.

Without rest, continuing without end, he continued to fight all alone.

It wasn't manly. It wasn't beautiful.

His simple honesty did not connect with salvation.

This was reality, and reality isn't so sweet.

Before long not even bones were left of his little sister's body, which returned into the earth.

With nothing for his hands to touch, Takeru embraced himself while clenching teeth and looked up at the sky.

"Damn... damn it...!"

No matter how much he stimulated her heart, a dead person won't go back to life. It was completely different from fighting and defeating enemies. No matter how much he continued, a miracle didn't happen. It was impossible right from the start.

However.

However, however, however, however.

"…………"

Takeru stopped embracing himself and reached out to the ground. Then started digging in the dry soil.

It was nothing but madness. From the moment he tried to revive a dead person, he was completely insane.

Even when the tips fingers broke, even when his nails broke, Takeru did not stop.

If there was someone who could stop him that would be——

The ones who are gone, people important to him who have disappeared.

——I wanted to be saved.

——I wanted someone to stop me.

——But there's no one here.

——There is no one to embrace me.

——I was weak to no end.

——I had nowhere near enough power to save.

——I can't bear being alone.

——Alone I'm just a fool.

——I can no longer live alone.

——Someone, help me.

"You really don't know when to give up."

After a ridiculously long time, the response had come when his own body was on verge of rotting. After over a hundred years, she appeared in front of Takeru.

From behind she hugged Takeru's shrunken and rounded back.

"You're miserable, brazen, selfish and self-righteous... but..."

He could no longer turn around. His arms were worn out, he might as well not have them. His body was merely a machine for breathing. Even his breathing would end soon.

She embraced Takeru's body, which had only bones and skin remaining on it.

"But I love that about you. Even if no one in the world acknowledges you... I will love you."

"............"

"I'm sorry to make you lonely until you have turned like this..."

This voice wasn't an auditory hallucination.

"Even if this isn't reality, I allowed you to taste loneliness for such a long time."

Warmth had touched Takeru's chilled heart.

"It's all right. You are no longer alone. I am with you. I am forever by your side."

His hand akin to a dead branch has reached out to the warmth.

"Even if you're weak... even if you're stupidly honest, I will grant you power."

"............"

"You haven't lost anything yet."

"............"

"So stand up with pride. For your own sake."

Power has filled his collapsing body.

He recalled. He got it back. Everything.

"Now——"

Takeru stood up.

"Wake up——it's time to save the world, Host."

Even if it's his selfishness.

Even if it's madness.

If he has the power to save——

——Kusanagi Takeru will stand up.

Chapter 1 - Together

Feeling warmth grasp his hand, Takeru clenched his teeth.

Even inside pitch black darkness, she told him he wasn't alone.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing in darkness.

Beside him, his azure partner was holding his hand.

Takeru looked up at the darkness.

"...Where's this?"

"Currently we are inside a sea of Hyakki Yakou, we are captured but are not receiving erosion. It appears Ootori Sougetsu had you receive mental contamination."

"..........."

"This place is inside Host's dream, a world inside your mind. Using our contract, I have blocked all interference from the outside."

He remembered that part. Within time that seemed like eternity, Takeru tasted loneliness that seemed like hell.

It was Lapis who saved him. He was saved by her warmth.

He decided not to let go of this warmth any more and strongly squeezed her hand.

"Let's go back. Can you wake me up?"

"Yes. But before that... let's talk a little."

Lapis let go of Takeru's hand, just to entangle her fingers with his and hold it again.

When he grasped it back, Lapis looked back up at him. Her pupils were shaking slightly and she moved her lips as if trying speak up.

"...What is it?"

He asked, and her pupils shook even stronger.

Lapis answered with a trembling voice.

"Actually... there is one way... to save the world."

Takeru's expression stiffened.

This should have been good news.

The reason he didn't rejoice, was because Lapis' expression wasn't too nice. She stared at him with an expression making it seem like she could burst into tears any time.

Takeru asked with intention of accepting any answer he could receive.

"Tell me. How, are you saying we can save the world? I will do it, no matter the method—— "

It was when Takeru put a hand on his chest and spoke to persuade Lapis.

"——You and Mistilteinn will become a substitute for a God."

Another presence has appeared inside the darkness.

It was a white-haired woman wearing a white robe.

Looking semi-transparent, the woman floated in the air like a ghost.

"Mother Goose...!"

"Do not worry. As I am now I have no power to interfere with you in any way."

It wasn't like he trust her, but recalling that he was in a world inside his mind, Takeru released his vigilance. She went missing after his battle with Orochi, but she did survive after all.

However, considering that all interference from outside has been blocked by Lapis, it must have meant that Lapis herself has invited Mother Goose to this world inside his mind.

"What's your motive? What do you mean by "substitute to God"?"

Despite trying to chew through Mother Goose's words, Takeru couldn't figure out what she meant.

"Kusanagi Takeru-san. Do you remember what goal we had in mind as we took action?"

Of course he remembered. Orochi acted in order to revive his older sister, Kusanagi Mikoto... no, in order to make it so that Mikoto's death never happened, he contracted Mother Goose and stood against the world.

Remake everything and invalidate the past.

Turn the world into a blank piece of paper and remake everything from the start.

It was because Takeru didn't accept that, that he fought against Orochi.

"...Remaking the world was your goal."

"Yes. Or to be more correct, to kill Ootori Sougetsu and through fusion of Orochi and me, acquiring the 《God's Vessel》."

Kill the God and become the God.

That was Mother Goose's and Orochi's goal.

Even Takeru, who wasn't especially smart, understood what Mother Goose tried to tell him.

"............Are you telling us to do what you were unable to?"

"Yes."

She said it as if it was natural.

He didn't think she was joking.

Both Gungnir and Mistilteinn were both Sacred Treasure.

"We Sacred Treasures have had our properties mutate upon the world's reconstruction. But although we have acquired personalities which were not inherent to us, or original shapes did not change. Even Mistilteinn, a replica created by the old humanity, should be able to become a vessel."

"............"

"I have taught Mistilteinn the operative procedure for 《Deification》. If you kill the God in our place and attain Godhood, you will be able to save the world."

Mother Goose spoke while coldly looking down on Takeru.

Attain Godhood. Takeru didn't know what that exactly meant.

But he knew that it *wasn't a good thing*.

"...You must be joking. As if we'd become a God to blank the whole world. Even God doesn't have the right to take away the past from the world."

Even if it was painful, Takeru wished for the past.

He wanted to move on into the future while shouldering the past.

"Just replacing the God will not turn the world blank. That choice will be left to you. It is up to God to decide what he does to the world."

"............"

"If you wish for the world to remain as is, then you just have to become the God and make it so."

Takeru couldn't feel any discontent or hesitation in Mother Goose's voice.

He furrowed his eyebrows. It was because he wasn't convinced by what Mother Goose said. Their goals were too different for her to help them out like this.

"I don't know... But are you all right with that?"

"I have already been defeated. My body will soon collapse and my soul disappear shortly after. If Ootori Sougetsu is to destroy this world, I'd rather prefer to entrust it to you two."

Mother Goose spoke flatly, without any sadness in her voice, spoke of her thoughts.

But then suddenly, she narrowed here eyes and her cold expression was tinged with humanity.

"Also... I have been entrusted this from host. He said that he would like me to leave you hope, in case that we were defeated."

"...Master has...?"

"He left a message. "This means you really mastered everything this time. Accept it, you dumb disciple"."

Or so he said, she added and quietly closed her eyes.

Takeru made a dumbfounded look. That message was very like Orochi. Short, rough, and included all his usual habits.

"Until the very end, he was an incomprehensible person."

Mother Goose muttered as she recalled Orochi.

When she thought about it, there were several strange things he did. When Takeru was temporarily captured in the Magic Academy, he told Takeru to "Deepen his ties with Mistilteinn", back then he was admonished that there were too few merits in it for their own goal. The fact that Orochi silently saw off Takeru and others back to the outside world, also seemed puzzling in retrospect.

Orochi should have known that Takeru will become his enemy.

And yet he trained Takeru, showing him future. Even after losing his life he had entrusted them with hope. In the end, he assumed several things that might happen and left Takeru several things.

Takeru faced down and squeezed his lips.

...Really... he's always, always doing whatever he pleases...

An image of Orochi smiling like a mischievous kid has passed through his head.

...Even though he came at me with no mercy...

He recalled the sensation of how Orochi ruffled his hair with a rough hand.

...And yet... he always does stuff that makes me unable to hate him...

Takeru recalled the smile his master made when he was being cut down.

I can only be grateful to you now... it's too much, Master.

His squeezed fist crackled.

The second time he received qualification for mastering the style. When he learned that he hasn't been taught everything there was in the Double-Edged style, Takeru felt a little dissatisfied with Orochi. He was ashamed for calling himself an initiate despite not being taught the secret arts.

But now, he was finally acknowledged by Orochi. By surpassing the wall called "Orochi", Kusanagi Takeru was able to move on.

Now that he was acknowledged, he couldn't find any other words than those of gratitude.

There was no choice but to accept the will of his master. Rather, was there any other way to fulfill his reckless wishes other than by becoming a God?

"............Host."

Lapis had returned the strong grip Takeru had on her hand.

Takeru softened his grip and looked at her. Unchanged, she seemed uneasy. He also didn't think everything would go so easily even if they become a God.

"Let's say we become a God, what happens to us then?"

"Even if you use 《Deification》 you won't become a perfect God. In the end you are just a demon and a Sacred Treasure's replica, your quality is simply notwithstanding. It's also impossible for you to become a living god like Ootori Sougetsu. He only could become one because of an error resulting from the collision of worlds."

"............"

"Once your and Mistilteinn's souls fuse, you will lose your existence as an individual. No one will be able to perceive your existence and existing merely as a soul, you will watch over this world."

"............"

"In other words, you will exist as merely a concept of God in this world."

He was prepared for this to an extent. The side effect of God Hunter Form was a fusion of soul and sublimation to a non-human existence. Deification also has to have drawbacks to it as well.

Originally in Norse Mythology 《God Hunter Forms》 was means for gods to kill each other and 《Deification》 existed to take the seat of the chief god for the individual. Explained Mother Goose.

He simply accepted the facts.

If we become a God, we won't be able to be together with our little sister.

If we become a God, we won't be able to be together with our comrades.

If we become a God, no one will be able to perceive us.

Only capable of watching over the world, they would continue to exist forever.

Definitely not. Not happening.

————But was there any other way for them to save the world?

"............"

Takeru closed his eyes. He could tell Lapis put all her strength into her hand holding his.

Think. You have to think. I might not be smart, but I have to find a way.

Think. Think, think, think.

"...It's okay, Host. You just have to be honest with yourself, that is all."

Lapis weakened the grip on Takeru's hand.

"Let's resist without becoming a God. Even if there is no way out, Host always pulls it through. You have kept overcoming various problems so far. So this time too——"

She unwound her fingers and was about to let go.

——But Takeru has gripped her hand once again.

——Strongly, while vowing not to let go of it ever again.

He opened his eyes and made a troubled smile.

"No. We won't find another way. If that guy remains as a God, we'll end up destroyed."

Hearing Takeru's words Lapis was shocked, rendered speechless.

While holding Lapis' hand, Takeru declared to Mother Goose.

"That's why I'm going to become a God. It's fine."

Just like that, he made a declaration not even a child would do, deciding his own fate.

Mother Goose quietly opened her eyes, and Lapis,

"——There is no way it's fine!!"

She got angry at him, making a voice he had never heard before.

Clinging to Takeru's arm, Lapis pressed her body against him.

"What happened to you?! Host isn't that kind of person! You are a more egoistic and selfish person!"

She was furious. She seriously snapped. Wrinkling her eyebrows strongly she was angry from the bottom of her heart. Takeru got scared by how overwhelming it was.

"Y-you're horrible... Well, that is true, but this can't be helped. There is no other way."

"It can't be helped...?! There's no other way...?! The person who decided not to kill Kiseki-san or kill himself because he selfishly wants to save both those lives wouldn't say such a thing! You're a person who won't do anything you don't like, aren't you?! Are you really satisfied with such a bad ending?!"

"Is it really that bad? I would be lying if I said I'm completely okay with this... but everyone will stay alive this way."

"Even if they remain alive, they won't be saved! Without you, no one in the 35th Platoon will become happy!"

All that Lapis said was correct and pierced through his heart.

Breathing roughly, she was about to hold down the collar of his shirt.

Lowering her voice, Lapis glared at Takeru.

"What about Ouka-sama? You're not going to walk by her side?"

"...Yeah. I won't be able to fulfill the promise."

"What about Mari-sama? You already know just how much does she like you, right?"

"...Yeah. I might not be able to give her an answer."

"Ikaruga-sama will continue to wait for you forever in the platoon's room."

"...Might be. She's stubborn and more sentimental than anyone else."

"Usagi-sama... if you aren't there, she will continue to cry forever."

"...I guess so. I'll be lonely as well not being able to pat her again."

"Kiseki-sama... You were the one who said you want her to stay by your side forever as your little sister...!"

"............Yeah. I want her by my side, it'll be really damn saddening."

"This is too horrible... Please stop with this self-sacrifice...! You shouldn't try becoming some stupid hero...!"

Holding his clothes so strongly they seemed about to rip, Lapis clenched her teeth and pressed her head against his chest.

He was honestly happy to see that she was thinking so much about the 35th platoon. It was one of the reasons why he felt frustrated and pathetic to make this decision.

Pained from the bottom of his heart, Takeru put a hand on Lapis' shoulder.

"It ain't self-sacrifice, nor becomin' a hero. I'll probably end up burdening everyone with something overwhelming. I know that well. Just like they are to me, I am important to them."

Although he felt embarrassed, he spoke what he thought. He did mention by himself that he is loved by everyone, no wonder he felt conceited because of that.

In fact, it was conceit. A person who wouldn't be conceited in a situation like this would be a piece of shit.

And he, making such a choice while being conceited, was even worse a piece of shit.

"But I don't think they will be unable to attain happiness if I disappear."

"...That's not true...!"

"They'll end up bearing a scar, but they should be able to move on. I mean, it's 35th platoon, right? They're strong... stupidly strong, even. As long as they have comrades they won't be unhappy, even if they act stubborn. They'll become happy enough to make me grit my teeth with frustration."

"That won't happen...!"

"This is my selfish belief... It's for the best."

"You're wrong...! If everyone is to lose you, it's better that we all fight together and have the world be destroyed!"

Raising her face from his chest, Lapis looked at Takeru's face.

And noticed that he was crying. He cried while desperately trying to smile.

"...No. That's no good... even if everyone's happy with that, we can't give in to destruction... *I don't want that.*"

After coming this far, Takeru forced his will through. He let out the worst selfishness there was inside him.

He too, was frustrated by this. Frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated and frustrated.

It was far from the happy end Takeru wanted, but it's not like there was no salvation in this. Now, he could only cling to this small salvation.

It was frustrating. But he was fine with it.

It was fine.

Making an expression as if her heart was crushed, Lapis asked Takeru.

"...Host... are you... really fine with that?"

"............"

"There's not even the least salvation left for you this way..."

"You will be forever alone... watching over the world... you will only continue to exist."

"............"

"You will be crushed by loneliness... you aren't strong enough to bear it... I know it the best of all ——"

Suddenly, Takeru embraced Lapis.

Strongly, almost strong enough to break her.

"Yeah, I'm ain't strong. Just earlier I tasted plenty of it, I hate loneliness. It's just as you say. ...But there is a salvation for me, y'know?

——I have you. Forever and ever I will be together with your soul, right?"

Takeru whispered so gently into Lapis' ear.

She opened her eyes wide. Takeru was no longer crying, he resolved himself while hugging Lapis with love.

"It'll be hard without being together with everyone. Being without Kiseki will also helluva hard on me too. But... you alone, will stay by my side."

"............Host."

"I'm fine with that. I think it's all right. The salvation I have found for myself, is you. Were there no salvation for me, I wouldn't have made this choice."

In an embrace, Lapis continued to stare at him with eyes wide open.

Before long, large droplets of tears spilled from them.

"If you only give me a nod, I will rush forward towards this conclusion. If you don't, I won't aim for this conclusion."

"..........."

"Lapis... will you be by my side for eternity?"

It was partially something like a confession. There were no lies in Takeru's feelings or what he said. It might have been caused by the situation, but it was no mistake that it was the truth.

Even if no one will be aware of his existence, he won't be unhappy as long as Lapis is together with him. As long as she is by his side, he will become happy.

It will be hard on him not being able to meet his little sister. He will be lonely not being able to meet his comrades. He would be so sad he would probably cry time after time again.

But if Lapis is there with him, he will bear it.

He wished for his comrades'; his sister's happiness.

Even if not everyone agrees with it, it was fine. Thought Takeru.

"That's not fair, Host."

Lapis slowly wound her arms behind his back.

"You are really terrible... I can't agree with being chosen in this manner."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm not lying, these are my real feelings."

"I know that, it makes you all the worse..."

"...I guess."

Agreeing with her, Takeru smiled bitterly.

She squeezed him with her hands wound behind his back.

"Being asked to like this... there is no way I can refuse. No way I can be against it. After all, I——"

——I love you.

"Yeah. I love you too, partner."

As he strongly returned the hug, flames appeared in Takeru's pupils.

The path to proceed on was decided. It was accompanied with the pain like nothing so far, but they couldn't stop here. Once they decided on it, they have to force their way through. Stand up time after time again. Even covered in mud and tumbling unsightly, wailing and crying, screaming angrily and laughing, they would accomplish this.

That was Kusanagi Takeru's way of living.

The hug ended and he let go of Lapis' body.

She wasn't expressionless, but smiled towards Takeru.

And the next moment, she stared at him intently.

"But you love everyone else too."

"H-hey... I properly do love y..."

"It's fine. I know. I love you including parts of you that are like that."

Lapis' smile when she said that could only be called wonderful. He really was surprised by her. She was so cute that he suddenly felt like dying from embarrassment.

As he slowly started blushing,

"——Flirting is okay, but isn't it about time you wake up?"

Astonished, Mother Goose spoke to the two. No wonder she felt like interrupting the two, as they have shown her a love scene like this despite the overall dangerous situation they were in.

In any case, Takeru resolved himself.

He will no longer choose to hesitate.

Together with Lapis, the two faced Mother Goose again.

"...Are you certain? I cannot guarantee success."

"So what? That's pretty normal for us."

Certainly, Mother Goose said and looked downwards.

Takeru didn't know much about her. What he knew was that she didn't hesitate to use any means to fulfill her goal, and was a cool-headed person just like Orochi.

But when she accepted Takeru and Mari to Magic Academy, she was at least kind to them.

As she entrusted hope to them, she seemed similar to how she was back then.

"Thank you. Thanks to you, the road has opened. We absolutely won't let this hope go to waste."

Mother Goose was surprised by his thanks.

And facing downwards a little, she made a small smile.

"...You are... very similar to Orochi, my Host. That person also was someone who kept giving his thanks to people, whether they were his enemies or allies."

"Well, can't deny we are alike. When Master turned younger he looked so much like me I was pretty disgusted by it."

Takeru scratched his head, having mixed feelings. Mother Goose looked at Lapis in the end.

"...You have chosen a good contractor, Lapis."

Mother Goose used Lapis' nickname for the first time. Lapis originally had no memory of the old world. She could only suspect that to Gungnir, she was a detestable enemy. If Mistilteinn was a replica of a Sacred Treasure, then it would mean that Lapis' mother would be——

"I need not be told that. Host, is the best Host of all."

"Fufu... I should have told mine the same while he was still alive. Although, my relationship with him wasn't like yours... nevertheless, I wanted to tell him that I have no regrets."

"If Kusanagi Orochi is similar to my Host, he should have understood that even if you didn't say it."

"...I guess you are right."

Smiling wryly, Mother Goose set her both hands as if to prayer.

"There is no time left. Go forth——I entrust you with the future of this world."

While she retained a posture for praying, her transparent body began to shine.

"I shall convert my soul to magic power and bestow it to you with 《Magic Power Transfer》. The "Twilight" property doesn't allow for Deification, but if you absorb my "God's Authority" magic power you should be able to use it as is."

"...Is really okay? If your soul disappears, you——"

"Oh, concerned about me? As expected of playboy, is what I'd like to say, but I have no intention of finding another Host."

"...Joking around at a time like this?"

"And I am your enemy, too. There is no guarantee I won't take you over. You never know if I won't reappear when you are about to become a God, and devour Kusanagi Takeru's soul."

Mother Goose said that and chuckled. Takeru made a strange expression seeing her joke in response to his concern.

He thought so back in the Magic Academy as well, but she might have been surprisingly mischievous.

"It's a joke. Just like you, *I'm fine with this*. Please use my soul for the sake of this world."

A white magic circle appeared and Mother Goose's body started to convert into particles of magic power.

Until the very end, Mother Goose prayed to the two.

"——I wish the two of you best of luck. If possible, I wish for your salvation in the end."

It was the last spell of the mother of witches, the White Witch of the East. Turned into particles, she wrapped around Takeru's and Lapis' bodies. It was a warm and gentle hug.

Although they were inside mental world, they could feel warm power well up from inside of them.

Holding Lapis' hand, Takeru clenched his fist.

The time to wake up has come. The time to fight has come.

The time for the last battle——

"Lapis."

"Yes."

Anticipating the future, the two held hands to confirm each other's presence as they shook off the darkness.

"...Let's go!"

"Yes, together."

Lapis' body disappeared. Azure-colored particles danced in the air like butterflies.

Takeru chanted the words of power for the last time.

Signaling the start of the battle.

Putting his heart, his soul in it,

""Desiring with supreme ardor——""

He announced.

""——Hammer of Gods!""

To kill the God, and reach Godhood.

The two set forth together.

Chapter 2 - Problem Children Gather Again

Ouka knew she couldn't persuade Mari.

The fact that her soul was seized meant that she was deprived of herself. The freedom of body and freedom of mind were completely different. Ouka too, was once deprived of bodily freedom, but was able to overcome it thanks to her strong soul, she thought.

But if one is deprived of the soul, there is no way for them to resist.

"Haa... haa...!"

I wonder just how much time has passed, this is the first time I have to concentrate this much in battle.

How many humans were still alive in this city? Was the main force of the Heretic Alliance safe? Were Sage, Yuzuho and Kirigaya safe? She wondered.

Where is Saionji, Suginami and Lapis?

And Kusanagi...

——A rainbow-colored pillar of light poured down from the sky and grazed Ouka's cheek. She flapped her wings and barely managed to avoid the attack. Also ahead of where she avoided to, there were pillars of light pouring down. She had no time to think of her comrades and would lose her life if she averted her attention even for a moment.

That was the kind of opponent she was fighting with.

——Concentrate, Ootori Ouka.

——The only thing you can do now, is to continue fighting.

——You have been entrusted with two lives.

——Your opponent's, and your own.

"——!!"

While avoiding the pillars of light she swung her right arm with abandon, releasing all 《Vampire》 stakes from her elbow.

Not to shoot her enemy down, but to block attacks.

By removing the stopper she was able to shoot the 《Earl's Fang》 from a large distance rather than close range. Unlike when she shot small stakes with the handgun form, she was unable to fire in succession after shooting a salvo. Five stakes made with magic power had chains attached to them and it was necessary to skilfully operate it with the elbow and then rewind the chain back to recover the stakes, but in exchange the power was equivalent to that of close range shots.

But if it misses, she'll fall into a predicament where she shows a big opening. Moreover, now that she didn't have Vlad's support, activating 《Earl's Fang》 took some time.

Seeing how Ouka didn't seem to intend on hitting Mari from a distance, it seemed like a really poor move.

It won't hit. The huge stake that was fired——has slipped by Nikaido Mari's side.

An exchange of attacks from a large distance was greatly unfavorable for Ouka. Without Vlad's support she was unable to easily release the opponent's protection barrier with the penetrating stake.

Even if she sniped from a distance, there was no way she could penetrate through multiple layers of a barrier. Meanwhile, Mari continued to pour the 《Aurora Rain》 from the sky as she maintained the barriers.

She had completely taken over the control over the battle.

While maintaining the barrier she poured down the 《Aurora Rain》, on top of that, there were more and more magic circles appearing around her. From Ouka's point of view, it looked as if she was going against a castle or a battleship. She was unable to get close, and it was also difficult to maintain distance because of the constantly-pouring 《Aurora Rain》.

It was the same tactics that are said to have been used by the ancient witches. Skilled witches would not move at all, instead performing all actions related to combat by using magic. Mari quietly floated on flight rings as she had her back turned to a building on the verge of collapse.

She casually extended her hand.

A change had started to occur as the number of magic circles deployed in the air had exceeded a hundred.

The hundred of magic circles were disassembled and rebuilt into one huge magic circle. A complex spell had activated as the magic circles synthesized and a sound similar to that of clashing metal had rang out.

It was the complete version of the strongest thermal-based attack the Aurora property had boasted of, the 《Aurora Gate》. Most likely, the firepower and the area of attack was several times larger than when Ouka saw it for the first time.

Were it to be released, Ouka would evaporate in an instant. She swung her left arm as if to say "I won't let you", and once again fired the 《Earl's Fang》 at Mari.

It didn't hit. The huge stake passed by Mari's side just like the first one and stabbed deep into the wall of the building behind her.

A huge gate has emerged behind Mari, a sound as if the atmosphere itself wailed had spread.

Ouka wouldn't let herself be beat just like that. While staring at the light concentrating in the gate she inhaled deeply and bracing herself she positioned her arms at the height of her waist.

——**snap**, **creaaaakkk**...!

The mechanisms at her elbows started to scatter sparks and creak soundly as she began to rewind the chains.

"——......!!"

Flapping the spread wings she also pulled the chain herself. The wings flapped strongly enough to generate a small tornado.

And the moment 《Aurora Gate》 was about to be fired——the building behind Mari has cracked soundly and broke in the middle.

The 《Earl's Fangs》 Ouka fired have acted as hooks and *pulled the building down*.

Taken by surprise, Mari tried to avoid the falling building but it was too huge and the upper part of the building had crashed into the spherical protective barrier. Mari pierced through the concrete wall like a bullet.

——**VVOOM**...!

The 《Aurora Gate》's aim has been displaced and it had passed over Ouka's head.

The magic in question was too rampant to be called just a flash and was beautiful enough for anyone to stare at it in admiration. A space-time distortion appeared several meters above Ouka caused by the magic power. The extreme auroral laser released from the gate had reached a hill far away and after grazing the top of it, it continued to stretch further.

Ouka drew the upper part of the building along with Mari, to herself.

"HAAaaAAaa!"

While rewinding the chain she charged at Mari.

With both her arms occupied, she released an 《Earl's Fang》 from the mechanism on her knee. She had no time to build an operative procedure for penetration. Using the impact of the incoming building, she fired 《Earl's Fang》 and pierced through by force.

Ouka's fang collided with Mari's protective magic and easily broke through the defense. Even the Aurora magic was unable to block this attack. After passing through the barrier, the fang had grazed Mari's cheek and pierced into the building's wall.

When Ouka disconnected the chain, the two started to fall down together with the building. Mari was unable to escape. Ouka was unable to move. In the middle of fall Ouka reached out to Mari and caught her shoulders.

"Nikaido!"

In the middle of the roar of the falling building, Ouka shouted towards Mari.

Even while feeling the huge building press down on them, Ouka continued to speak to her.

"...It's okay!"

Mari didn't answer. Ouka could only continue to speak in this situation.

They approached the ground filled with red meat. Ouka clenched her teeth and kicked the building with all the strength she had in her body.

——Momentarily, the upper part of the building that was about to clash into the ground, was blown away.

A loud roar and a cloud of dust rose up to the sky. Scattered debris collided with other buildings causing a chain collapse. The rubble crushed into small pieces has fallen to the ground and was preyed on by the red meat, which acted like a starved beast.

Rainbow-colored flying rings shone in the dust.

Slowly and without making any sound, Nikaido Mari landed on the debris of the building which was sinking into the sea of meat.

On the verge of smashing onto the ground, Ouka smashed apart the entire upper part of the building. For her as she was now, in vampire form, destroying a building was as easy as taking a candy from a baby.

Mari stared at the smoke. From the looks of her, she seemed like a machine searching for something. She looked up from inside the smoke at the sky. There, a shadow with spread wings had descended on the debris of the building ahead.

The smoke had settled down. With meaty sounds in the background, under the cloudy sky, the crimson shadow stared at Mari.

Once again, Ouka spoke to her.

Even though she knew her words won't reach, she still said them.

"I'm alive. I promise that I will never die by your hand."

"…………"

"*I will not be killed by you*. I won't let your conviction be tainted with my death."

Mari's conviction, that is – not to kill. No matter how evil the opponent is, she wouldn't kill them.

Ouka knew that this conviction of hers wasn't just talk.

Because life was important, no matter what kind of life it is.

If Ouka asked Mari whether she thinks so, Mari would probably laugh at her.

At one time, when they were living their normal life Mari said: "I don't kill because I hate killing. Lives aren't equal. There are lives that should be saved, and those that should be ended. It's certain that there are lives that should not exist.".

『"But I won't take those lives."』

It wasn't logical. But it didn't matter whether it was or not. She hated killing, so she didn't kill. This was the root of her conviction not to kill.

Ouka who stood on just the opposite side of such beliefs, thought it was something precious.

"Be at ease and smash everything you have at me."

That's why Ouka won't let herself be killed by Mari. She will continue fighting.

What she aimed at, was Mari running out of magic power. After spending so much magic power until now, Mari shouldn't have much remaining. If she runs out, her combat ability will be equal to none.

Until now Ouka avoided the big moves and this was the reason why. Mari should have consumed a large amount of magic power to cast the 《Aurora Gate》, so she must have few magic power remaining.

She will use the magic she obtained from Vlad's soul to save Mari. Ouka crossed her arms and closed her eyes. She could tell that at the same time, Mari expanded magic circles again.

Are you watching…?

Opening her eyes, Ouka flapped her wings and kicked off the building

Mari generated a black and silver magical swords.

Are you watching this… Vlad?

Swinging her arm, Ouka delivered a blow to Mari.

The magical swords in Mari's both hands were blocked by that blow.

Using the rebound from the blocking, Ouka jumped over Mari's head and moved behind her.

Am I as noble as you wanted me to be?

Instead of attacking, she tried restraining Mari from behind.

However, Mari released a wave of magic power from her body, blowing Ouka away.

Blown away, Ouka flapped her wings and charged at Mari again.

Watch over me from wherever you are, partner...!

She couldn't let Mari open up a distance between them. At short range Ouka could pierce through the barrier by pure force, but at distance she would be one-sidedly barraged with attacks. Avoidance is also easier when she's near her target. For as long as possible she had to continue approaching Mari and destroy her protective magic to use up her magic power.

——There was no other way!

Still turned with her back to Ouka, Mari twisted her waist and pointed her fingertips at Ouka as if aiming with a pistol.

Ouka opened her eyes wide in surprise and twisting her body, stopped her charge.

The 《Aurora Bullet》. Concentrated magic power moving at high speed had penetrated one of Ouka's wings.

Receiving an impact from the magic, Ouka fell while spinning. She couldn't allow herself to move away, so she immediately restored her wing and quickly rose back up to close the distance.

Mari wasn't good at close combat. Although she could use high-powered magic attacks, her reflexes and overall physical abilities weren't too high. If only Ouka could close the distance——

"《Aurora Benefit》"

That moment, Mari's body was covered with a very thin layer of aurora light. Ouka, who tried to close the distance had immediately taken a defensive posture.

"——!!"

The moment she stopped in mid-air, a black sword was thrust centimeters away of her forehead.

She twisted her head, unable to find any other way to avoid it.

The sword had gouged Ouka's cheek and cut her hair. The moment she understood that Mari had cast a strengthening magic on her body, Mari twisted her body right in front of Ouka and used her left leg to deliver a kick. While using the 《Aurora Enchantment》 she smashed her left heel onto Ouka's head.

That move looked just like the roundhouse kicks Ouka specialized in.

Ouka's break shook, and forced herself to stay awake as her consciousness was fading to darkness, she received a follow-up blow from Mari. As she received the sword attack with her fang, she immediately caught herself bitterly regretting it.

There was no doubt that Mari was bad with close combat. Ouka knew she didn't like it.

——Yet she was fast. Her speed was abnormal. Even if her soul has been taken over, that's no reason for her to exercise more power than normal.

Body strengthening magic. And considering the reaction rate, her cerebral nerves were also strengthened. It was the same thing Haunted was doing to deal with Takeru's speed during battle.

Having eyes of a vampire, who are said to see through what normally can't be seen Ouka was able to somewhat follow his speed. However, Mari was just a human. Ouka knew the danger of brain-strengthening magic, and so did Mari, which was the reason she hadn't done that until now.

A small amount of blood started trickling from Mari's eyes and nose. It was difficult to tell from outside appearance, but her insides must have been a mess.

Both of them were already a mess.

...Same as usual.

Although she was in a predicament, Ouka smiled wryly as she battled with Mari.

Ever since the battle against EXE at the Critical Point, to following battle with Mother Goose and coping with Hyakki Yakou they had no time to rest. Mari who had once lost her limbs and suffered massive bleeding should have been far more worn out than Ouka.

And yet, her attacks were still fierce. Even if she used Mother Goose's magic power to heal herself up, it wasn't like she was completely cured. Good grief, she's way too talented as a magic user and knows her way around magic power consumption efficiency.

"Hey, do you remember?"

As the sword and fang met, Ouka started to quietly speak to Mari.

"Even now I recall the days when we just met for the first time."

Even though she knew no voice would reach Mari, she kept talking as they continued to combat.

"While both of us carried burden of our past, you were the complete opposite of me. You, who naively embraced the idea of "non-killing" and me, who judged evil with death, were completely incompatible."

In the middle of the exchange of blows Mari leaped backwards and created a magic circle, then immediately released an 《Aurora Bullet》 without any pre-charging.

Ouka who had predicted her actions avoided the bullet by diving low and returned to close combat.

"Our personalities are polar opposites as well. Your free-spiritedness annoyed me. Unlike me, you were honest, frank, and refined..."

Mari's onslaught did not stop, but Ouka continued.

Fangs made of magic power and magical swords scattered particles of magic power which drifted around them in the air.

"I hated you... really."

She said, feeling nostalgic about their past selves.

The sword raised up high had approached Ouka's head from above, and was received with fangs in Ouka's both hands.

"Ngh... But at the same time I envied you. You, whom I hated in my revenge... you..."

"............"

"You were just too dazzling...!"

Repelling the sword, Ouka brought her face to Mari's close enough for their noses to touch.

And grasped Mari's arms as she tried to slash her again.

"I envied you that you believed in yourself so straightforwardly! That you had the strength to smile at all times, no matter what was happening around us!"

She twisted Mari's strengthened arms by using force even beyond that.

All that Ouka forced out of herself, were parts of her she didn't want to admit existed.

"You reminded me just how little my troubles and suffering was...! Just by standing next to you I couldn't help but feel miserable...! It was all because I knew I couldn't be like you...!"

She, who was burdened with her past was unable to simply believe in herself like Mari did. Ouka's past was filled with darkness.

But, that's why——!

"But that's why I was able to bear with myself! Thanks to you I could remain being myself!"

Seeing Mari's back as she ran in front, she couldn't bear just walking forward.

The reason Ouka thought they're completely incompatible with Mari, lied in this.

It wasn't because she was a witch. Not because she was a rival in love either.

——I just don't want to lose to her.

There was no logic behind it, Mari just had something that made Ouka think so. Even though Ouka longed for it, she didn't want to chase after Mari's back. Her frustration continued to accumulate until she couldn't bear it. I just have to be myself, and polish myself. If I am to be envious of her, I should rather aim to become myself I can be proud of. Even if we acknowledge each other now, that one thing doesn't change.

Just earlier, she was saved by Mari twice.

As if she could stay quiet about this.

She had didn't say thanks. She didn't want to say them. Instead she would return thanks with actions.

The two who had the worst and the best compatibility at the same time, were indispensable existences to each other in order to improve themselves.

It wasn't hatred, but the resistance towards each other that sublimated into bonds, even while in conflict they continued to move forward.

——That is what it means to be worthy rivals!

"I'll have you——continue staying by my side from now on as well!"

Ouka roared right in front of Mari's face. As if to respond to that, Mari's hair rose up and magic power was concentrated between the two.

No magic circle had appeared. It was just a mass of magic power.

A Magic Bash——the moment she realized, Aurora magic power had exploded between them.

It had no power strong enough to wound them, but the impact was strong enough to blow Ouka away.

The two moved away from each other and faced off from a distance.

Mari closed her eyes and once again generated several magic circles.

She was trying to trigger the second 《Aurora Gate》. Ouka wasn't attacked with the 《Aurora Rain》 for restriction. Perhaps, Mari used that magic power for protective magic instead. The aurora barrier covering Mari wouldn't be so easily to pierce this time.

Ouka took a deep breath while in mid-air. Once 《Aurora Gate》 activated it's difficult to avoid it, and since Mari's speed was higher than during the Mock Battle Tournament, trying to avoid it was suicidal. However, trying to stop it before activation wasn't beneficial either. Cancelling her magic would only prolong the battle. Ouka too, was at disadvantage during an extended battle. Although Ouka's current supply of magic power was higher, Mari was superior when it comes to efficient usage of it. Prolonging it would be disadvantageous and tricks like earlier wouldn't work again.

In which case.

"I'll pierce head on."

She disassembled the mechanism on her right arm and rebuilt it.

Concentrating magic power, Ouka built a mechanism several times larger than she was.

It was the first time she made it this huge. Vlad was a Relic Eater that was lacking in defense, so there was no way for her to cope with attacks like this. She concentrated magic power on the enormous stake protruding from her elbow. Emitting red and black lightning the stake rotated violently growing red as if heated up. But it wasn't enough, not yet.

She had the operative procedure for 《Aurora Gate》 in her head. While the amount of magic power required for 《Earl's Fang》 was inferior to that of 《Aurora Gate》, the intrinsic performance allowing to pierce magic should fill that difference. The problems were the duration of the magic and whether Ouka would succeed reversing the operative procedure. Magic penetration was capable of piercing through protective barriers and Witch Hunter Form, so it could also dispel this magic.

But it wasn't so easy against attack magic. If protective and reinforcement magic are hit and penetrated, they are invalidated by destroying the operative procedure. But it was different for attack magic, especially for one so powerful as 《Aurora Gate》. It wasn't something that could be dispelled just by being hit.

It could be only penetrated. Furthermore, going against such amount of magic power she had to build a stake with considerable amount of durability.

If she's stingy with magic power in here, she'll be done with. Not upholding the promise was a definite no. That's why she put all the magic power she had into this blow, including all the magic power Vlad had left behind.

The condensed magic power changed color from deep red into deep crimson, then sublimated into the utmost limit of crimson color.

Redder than blood, more crimson than a flame, shining brighter than a sun.

A huge magic circle appeared behind the rotating stake.

She had no need for tricks. In order to improve the fang's quality she started its restoration and made it capable to of standing up to Mari's aurora.

At the same time Ouka finished her preparations, a gate appeared behind Mari. The gate, reminiscent of an entrance to another world was solemn, dazzling and overwhelming its spectators. It announced to the world that it is light, that is the strongest phenomenon in the world.

Ouka faced it with a tiny fang, as compared to the huge gate.

However, that fang's shine, the crimson color dwelling inside burned bright red.

Mari opened her closed eyes and protruded her open hands forward.

Ouka too, breathed in heavily and swung her right arm.

"——《Aurora Gate》"

"《Earl's Fang》——!"

The one who released her magic first was Mari. The door of the gate opened and light overflowed from inside. It was said that in the distant past, this great magic has erased entire fleet with a single blow. 《Aurora Gate》 did indeed have the power to support that anecdote.

The extremely intensive light had swallowed Ouka completely. Inside, there was not a speck of darkness or sound, just light alone. A world that rejected any life and any substance.

Truly a hell——inside of which stood Ouka.

She rejected the rejection. She stood there while protruding the fang and inside the vortex of light that could be called nothing but a threat, she maintained her existence which seemed like it would be erased any time.

Only the part of the vortex that touched the fang had disappeared. However, the light was like a muddy stream, even though the fang was huge, it wasn't a defensive wall. The particles of light that weren't erased were eroding Ouka. Pieces of armor the particles touched had disappeared and Ouka's own body was assaulted. Even with a vampire body she was unable to maintain her existence in this world.

Therefore, she restored herself, restored again and again. Her turning-to-ash body was being recovered with the recovery ability peculiar to true ancestor vampires.

The restoration didn't make in time and she started being suppressed by light. Her appearance looked like that of a piece of ice inside of a flame. She was unable to scream or to feel pain. What she was allowed to was not the fear of being killed, but that of being erased.

——Clench your teeth. Open your eyes wide.

I can't let myself be erased. I must not let my body perish away before the fang breaks. Even if it's just bones left behind me, I'm not disappearing before the fang breaks.

Look forward. Push forward. Waiting ahead of this pierced light there's your future, Mari's future and your comrades' future.

The magic power ejecting from the shooting mechanism boosted her charge with the fang. She couldn't afford to use magic power on restoration of the wings. Only the fang and her own body were remaining.

The fang started to crack. Recovery was unable to catch up with Ouka's body restoration and she started turning to ash starting from her feet. A fearful soul whispered into her ears inviting her to comfort. Tapping weakly on her shoulder it suggested that being killed by her best friend is what she wanted.

Shut up, be silent. Ouka spat away. As if I'd lose. I will not disappear until I win this round and puff up my chest in front of Mari.

Forward. Move forward. You have resolved herself so many times until now.

Enough of this talk, just move on and pierce, Ootori Ouka!

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoOOoOOOOOOOOoOOOoo!!!!!"

Responding to Ouka's roar, the fang rotated. Penetrating the vortex of light she rushed straight ahead.

Then finally, she has overcome the light.

After breaking out of the vortex she struck the upper part of the gate with the fang. She had the operative procedure in her head. If she breaks down the gate, it will be impossible to maintain the magic and the magic power will diffuse.

Just as Ouka expected, the gate collapsed the moment the fang had struck it. The magical power building the 《Aurora Gate》 had scattered.

In tatters, she had the mechanism disappear and somehow reconstructed the wings. Flapping them, she took a deep breath. Were she a step late, her recovery wouldn't have kept up and she would have been erased.

"《Eclipse Blade》"

Deploying a sword, Mari aimed for Ouka in mid-air and attacked.

But Ouka didn't move. It wasn't that she had no strength left to fight, she could continue fighting in close combat but was confident that the battle had already ended.

As the swung sword approached Ouka's forehead, the very moment it was about to hit - the 《Eclipse Blade》 crumbled away and scattered. And it was not because Ouka nullified it with her stake.

Mari had finally ran out of magic power.

As she swung down the crumbling sword, Mari closed her eyes as if falling asleep. The flying rings disappeared and as her fall started, she was held up in the air by Ouka.

But Ouka too, was covered with wounds. Her rebuilt wings hadn't enough strength left to support two people.

This is bad, the exhaustion is... beyond what I expected...!

Even if she tried to crash onto the roof of a sunken building, she was unable to correct their trajectory in time and they fell straight into the sea of meat.

Ouka embraced Mari as if to protect her and covered her with her wings.

That was all she could do now. Both of them were falling into the sea of demons. In the end, Ouka strongly hugged Mari.

——**thwump**, a strong impact hit her body.

Her arm was caught by something, it took her a few moments to realize their fall had stopped.

When she looked up, someone caught her arm from on top of a sinking building.

Who was it?

"Sorry, I'm late."

Ahh, it's you.

Somewhere deep in her heart she thought he would come.

But this guy, he's always, ALWAYS...

"...You're late."

Ouka said along with a sigh and smiled lightly.

* * *

The reason Ikaruga immediately moved to check on Kiseki's body was because she predicted what Ootori Sougetsu intended to do. To confirm her condition, Ikaruga sent Nanomachines inside Kiseki's body and found out that Kiseki awakened despite the fact her brain was asleep and immediately moved to protect Usagi.

Using the Nanomachines, she converted her own body into that of a dark elf and while it was extremely simple, she was able to maintain a protective barrier.

Right now Hyakki Yakou was a weapon of mass destruction whose controls have been completely lost. Although Kiseki controlled the Hyakki Yakou before, there was no doubt that deep inside her heart she was limiting its activity.

Right now, Hyakki Yakou continuously attempted to kill Ikaruga. Like water that's sucked into a drain, the demon cells gathered in her location. What she could do, was only to endure and maintain the protective barrier.

Facing the overwhelming muddy stream of demons, it was nearly impossible for her to cast 《Calamity》 while maintaining the barrier. Blowing Hyakki Yakou away with anti-matter bomb would be the best, but although Ikaruga was a first-class scientist, her knowledge as a witch was very poor and she had no talent. She knew that the best herself, that's why she could only continue to endure like this.

Inside the spherical barrier Ikaruga continued to curl up. The barrier was destroyed and repaired, the repetition of it caused her a tremendous pain. It was necessary for her to maintain the barrier more efficiently, but Ikaruga hadn't the means to do so.

"Good grief... I feel envious of Nikaido's talent, damn it."

Scooping the sweat off her forehead, Ikaruga grumbled. She acquired a dark elf's body, excellent magic power and its amount, but with her consciousness remaining human she was unable to exercise that power well.

She had three more barriers remaining. If she expanded any more barriers to the inside, there would be no space left for their bodies inside it.

This was the limit, it would hold for about a minute longer.

"Me having a dark elf's body is... what a waste of resources."

Ikaruga smiled bitterly to Usagi.

Without giving an answer, Usagi has performed a check on her weapons. She no longer was like her past self where she acted timid or become completely paralyzed from fear, trembling.

She did all that was within her ability.

The maintenance of her favorite gun, "Rabbit Fang" and confirmation of remaining bullets.

She took out anti-magic bullets, aurora bullets, and from a military pouch she took out anti-matter bullet at which she stared with a squint.

The anti-matter bullet wasn't like an instant charm where a magic-absorbent material was used to absorb magic power. Since there was no material that could absorb this much magic power and that the magic was activated at the same time the bullets landed, Ikaruga fixed anti-matter inside using a magnetic field and covered that with an extremely thin layer of anti-magic material to confine it.

If by chance the warhead was to break, the magic would be activated. Considering that, it was necessary to fire this bullet using magic power instead of gunpowder.

Rabbit Fang had enough magic power charged in it.

It was possible to fire it.

Raising the anti-matter bullet up to her mouth, Usagi closed her eyes as if praying.

"Suginami, listen carefully to what I say now."

"Ahh... you don't have to tell me, I can somewhat tell what you want to do."

"It's fine, just listen to me."

With her eyes still closed, Usagi moved her face right next to Ikaruga's.

"To break free from this predicament there is no choice but to blow it all away with the anti-matter bullet. However, if I shoot at this distance we will get caught up in the explosion."

"...So you're saying... you want me to protect us before we get caught up in it?"

"Indeed so."

"No way."

Ikaruga answered immediately and turned her pale face away.

She wasn't just screwing around. She couldn't do what was impossible for her to do.

When she said that, Usagi drew her face even closer.

Involuntarily, Ikaruga moved her face away.

Furrowing her eyebrows, Usagi spoke.

"I do not want to hear your complaints. You will do it even if it's impossible, I would be troubled otherwise."

Forcefully pushing the anti-matter bullet into the magazine for magical discharge, she continued.

"We cannot just wait until Kusanagi comes. If we wait, we will surely die."

As Usagi said this, one of the three remaining barriers broke.

Hyakki Yakou further pressed onto them.

"Do it, please. If you do not, we will die."

Resolve, nervousness, fear. Usagi felt none of it as she said that to Ikaruga. After going through countless battlefields, she was the one who was to deliver the decisive blow and that was the reason she could say this. It wasn't like she was used to this situation either, nor has grown immune to it.

All she did, *was to state the facts*.

Having a grasp on the situation, accepting it, and pulling the trigger to overturn the situation was the sniper's job.

"...To think the day would come when I would hear something like that from you, huh."

Ikaruga seemed to resign herself, grasped Usagi's shoulders and turning around her body she hugged Usagi from behind.

While sitting on the ground, she strongly embraced Usagi.

Usagi pullet the rifle's bolt, inserting the anti-matter bullet.

"It's all right. You made this magic, you made it and you can block it as well."

"You make it sound easy... I'm not Nikaido. It's troubling to get this much trust."

"Of course I will trust you. How many scenes of carnage do you think I have passed through together with you?"

Lifting up the barrel, Usagi set herself up.

Ikaruga drew her face close to Usagi's and closed her eyes in silence.

She had to concentrate now more than ever. She was given only an instant to open up the deployed protective barrier to allow Usagi to to fire at the incoming Hyakki Yakou before it approaches them. Afterwards, she had to remake a full-powered protection magic... no, as long as it blocked it, it mattered not what did she use. She had to use everything whether it's magic power or anything else that's dwelling inside her own body to block the 《Calamity》.

The timing was important. She couldn't do it before Usagi fires, and she couldn't be late or they would be caught in 《Calamity》 and be done for. She had to do it nearly simultaneously with the firing.

The second barrier broke and only one piece was remaining.

Usagi put her finger on the trigger.

"It might be our last moment, you're not satisfied with me being the one to hug you, right?"

"Of course. So make sure it is not our last moment."

"...Geez, you sure have grown strong. So uncute."

Ikaruga hugged Usagi more strongly.

Preparations are complete. That's what she tried to say by doing that.

Usagi started the countdown.

"Three... two... one..."

She put strength into the finger on the trigger. Ikaruga opened her eyes wide and concentrated all her nerves on invoking magic.

"——Zero."

When Usagi's countdown chant reached Ikaruga's ears, she calmly released the last protective barrier.

Momentarily the Hyakki Yakou has started flowing in. But an instant before that, Usagi's finger squeezed the fateful trigger.

The bullet landed and the warhead was crushed. And the energy ancient alchemists were unable to produce had started to overflow. Although there were only few grams of the substance, it was not allowed to exist by the matter and had caused an explosion.

The moment the explosion bringing neither light nor darkness had spread, Ikaruga unleashed the nearly-infinite magic power inside her dark elf body to the outside.

Two impacts collided. During the moment destruction ran rampant, the surroundings have turned silent. The destruction had erased the sound. Inside the storm of destruction Ikaruga screamed as she embraced Usagi.

It was the first time she screamed like this. Even if she couldn't hear it as a sound, she could tell just how loud she was screaming through the trembling of her throat.

She didn't expect she would be longing to live so strongly. At first she tried to build protective magic, but was unable to maintain it and ended up just releasing the magic power that was inside her body. Thanks to the dark elf's magic power Ikaruga and Usagi were barely able to remain safe.

I'm not dying in a place like this...!

Ikaruga opened her eyes widely.

I still have plenty things I want to do...!

Memories passed through her head. Her farewell with Isuka, Kanaria's loss. Encounter with Takeru. Usagi and Ouka. The daily life with Mari. Reunion with Kanaria. Words of rejection. Gaining consciousness of her sins. The moment she was accepted as a mother for the first time. And the feeling she had when she held her daughter to her chest.

It was as if she was recalling her life before dying.

——Don't make it our last moment!

She felt like was hearing Usagi's voice.

"That's right——give me a break! I wasn't calling for memories! Right now I want the future!"

Ikaruga shook off the memories, seeking future rather than the past.

"This is just our beginning!"

She pushed back the destruction with magic power.

Using all of my existence I'll definitely block this.

This is what I can do now.

It's to protect your own life. Whether it's Nanomachines or a fantasy organism's cells, use whatever you can to survive.

Live and come back! Back to that place!

To that place I love!

We're all going back together!

Ikaruga's roar blew everything away. The 《Calamity》's destruction was scattered.

* * *

What remained behind was just the appearance of Ikaruga and Usagi cowering in the middle of cloud of ash.

Covered in ash, Usagi lifted her face and coughed violently.

They were alive. Ikaruga did it.

However, it was no time to feel safe. Thanks to the 《Calamity》 the Hyakki Yakou in the surroundings have disappeared temporarily, but soon enough started crawling up to them again.

Usagi quickly confirmed Ikaruga's safety.

"Suginami! Can you stand?!"

"Tough call... ignoring law of equivalent exchange's the selling point but... looks like adjustments... are necessary."

"I'll carry you! Make sure not to be shaken off!"

Putting the rifle's belt on her shoulder, Usagi placed Ikaruga on her back.

And she started to run while stomping heavily on the ground. It was because she normally handled the big gun with her abnormal strength running around different battlefields as a sniper that she could now run with Ikaruga on her back.

Of course, she wasn't fast enough to escape from the Hyakki Yakou tsunami.

"M-maybe I should go on a diet..."

"Stop saying things like that when your weight is not much different from mine!"

"No dieting for you... it'll be boring if your boobs shrink..."

"All breasts are is a problem when I run!"

"No... when I'm back... I'll lick all over your boobies——"

"Stop setting dumb death flags! I'll smash this flag of yours!"

As usual, Ikaruga joked even at times like this. No, it was more like she couldn't bear this without joking lightly. It could be said that this has already turned into way to for the 35th platoon's members to calm down.

If not for joking around, they wouldn't have survived this hopeless war until now.

Thanks to 《Calamity》's explosion the location had turned into an open space, the remnants of the buildings that remained and acted as obstacles have almost completely disappeared. A wave of Hyakki Yakou coming from beyond the range of explosion had come to assault them. Swirling sea of raging red meat closed on them without mercy.

Both from the front and the back.

"Khh!"

Usagi leaped to the side and the waves clashed against one another and the red meat splashed around. To circumvent them, Usagi ran in a direction where she had an open path of escape.

She avoided the waves while on the verge of stumbling and despite knowing there was no safe place, she still struggled.

But before long, their road was cut off.

When they crossed a piece of rubble from a small building, they were surrounded by the sea of Hyakki Yakou.

"Haa... haa...!"

"Lend me... a gun."

Usagi silently passed a handgun she had as a sub-weapon to Ikaruga.

She had no intention of killing herself. Ikaruga confirmed the number of bullets in the magazine and raised the gun.

Usagi also lowered the rifle from her shoulder and set it up.

The two loaded the bullets at the same time.

"Let's last even if a second longer."

"Yes, as long as we can!"

They had no intention of giving up. They didn't think it was pointless to struggle until getting this far.

Prolonging their survival even if a second longer, they restored their physical strength. When Ikaruga's stamina recovers she'll be able to turn into an elf again, allowing them to escape by flying or something similar.

Ikaruga herself had no intention of saying she can't do it.

We'll somehow manage. We'll do whatever has to be done to manage.

We'll definitely survive.

They challenged it while thinking so. Struggled with such resolve.

That was the the 35th Test Platoon's style.

As they squeezed the triggers, their guns spit fire. It was infinitely close to ineffective against the incoming Hyakki Yakou, but it wasn't in vain. As living beings, demon cells were frightened by it for a moment.

Since they were surrounded it was likely they would be attacked from behind. That's why the two stood back to back covering each other. The muddy stream of demons mocked it useless, but the two stared at it not giving up the will to fight.

What put an end to this battle, was of course a demon.

To be more precise, it was a boy with a soul of a demon.

"You did well, you two."

——*ZVOON*!

Along with an impact flame has spread all over. Usagi and Ikaruga were covered in flames, but the flames in question weren't hot at all.

Flames burned the muddy stream of demons and the demonic sea in liquid form had vaporized. Even the Hyakki Yakou which was called "unconfirmed" Ancient Property, it was unable to resist the god-slaying flames.

Transferred between the demon cells, the flames spread and burnt them out everywhere.

In an instant, the sea of demons surrounding Usagi and Ikaruga was erased.

And in front of the two, there was the usual figure's back.

Ouka carrying in Mari in the sky fired a stake, releasing his armor.

When the boy leaned the sword on his shoulder and turned around, Usagi and Ikaruga——

"Sorry, I'm——"

""YOU'RE LATE!!""

Before Takeru could apologize, they drew close and yelled at him.

"Umm..." Takeru bent backwards with shock on his face.

"Why are you doing this every SINGLE time?! Are you doing it on purpose?!"

"Kusanagi, play cool in moderation. I can understand you wanting to show off, but think of the situation. Could you STOP involving us with your poor hobby?"

Seeing the two act seriously angry, Takeru immediately started to protest.

"You guys are horrible! Why am I suspected of choosing the timing to save you?! I've had lots of trouble on my side too——"

"If you did not do this on purpose you would not appear with such timing at EVERY occasion!"

"I bet you go "now'll be good" or "it's about time" as you look from hiding, right? How petty, totally uncool."

"——This is a serious case of a false accusation! Why do I have to be told off as thanks for saving you!"

Takeru protested against the unreasonable accusation. As the three started arguing like usual, Ouka descended from the sky while staring at them appalled.

That's when Mari whom she held in both arms opened her eyes.

"...Mm... Ouka?"

Being called by name, Ouka looked down on Mari.

"You woke up, that's great."

"I... why am I...?"

Mari tried to recall what was she doing, but feeling pain instead she put a hand on her own forehead.

"Don't try to recall if you don't remember. Takeru released the binding on your soul. You don't have to worry any more."

"Binding on my soul...?"

"When your magic power ran out, the binding was absorbed along with your magic power by the《Ragnarøkkr Enchant》. It's better not to make any sudden movements until your phantom instrument is refilled with magic power."

Being calmed down like that, Mari quietly obeyed her.

"I see... I... Chairman did something to me and... heck, why am I being held in your arms...?"

As she was about to follow Ouka's instruction, Mari noticed in what condition she was.

Opening and closing her mouth in panic, pale, she stared at Ouka.

"I don't have such hobbies though?!"

"...What are you talking about?"

"L-let me down, the only one who can touch my thighs is Takeru!"

Being lightly slapped all over by Mari, Ouka squinted and made an angry expression.

And just like that, she let go of her.

Letting out a "ngyah" scream Mari fell on her butt. She fixed her hat's positioning, rose up and started flailing her arms. Although Ouka was the one who dropped her, she was still surprised at how effortlessly Mari stood up.

"I-I told you not to move so suddenly. You might die if something goes wrong."

"Whhuuat?! Did you forget I saved you twice just earlier?! Damn ungrateful!"

“*snap**. Ouka's eyebrows started to cramp up.

"Hoohh〜? I'm being called ungrateful by someone who doesn't even remember how I saved her?"

"HAa? When did you even save me? It was Takeru, wasn't it!"

"Wha... T-Takeruu——! Tell her, tell her just how much I struggled——"

"I don't remember so it doesn't count."

"Y-youuuu!"

"Don't call me "you"! Call me "Mari-chan"!"

Just like the other three, the two started to fight.

When everyone gathers together, whatever situation it was, they returned back to being the original 35th platoon. Without anyone to stop them, this would continue without end. There was something critical missing in their heads, they couldn't tie the ends when it mattered. They really acted as usual.

"............"

While being chewed out by Usagi and Ikaruga, Takeru suddenly returned back to their situation in reality.

The warm feeling in the back of his chest was something a part of him felt would remain there forever.

And there was part of him that thought he didn't want to lose it.

This is my place. I won't go anywhere. I don't want to go anywhere. It's dear, so, so dear to me I can't bear it. Back in that room, sitting on the sofa, drinking tea Usagi prepared and eating sweets, bickering over how to earn points until the story derails, only to end the platoon activites without any results...

And on the next day too.

And the day after that, the usual, same happy daily life——

"............Ghh."

Takeru strongly grasped the handle of the sword at his waist, Lapis.

I won't cry any more. I'll cry once everything is over. Takeru decided not to talk everyone about his decision. He knew that if he did, they would all try to stop him.

There was no choice but to proceed while feeling the sense of guilt. He decided to shoulder that suffering.

He suppressed felt pain in his chest and a helpless longing for happiness. Were he to be alone he would surely be crushed by the suffering. If not for Lapis being with him, Takeru wouldn't move forward on this path.

Takeru tried to say his thanks to Lapis, but at that moment.

A demon's roar had come from the sky.

"?!"

Everyone looked up to the sky while at loss for words.

The sky was covered with the giant demon tree. There was the sound of tsunami pushing towards them from afar. And it wasn't just the sea of meat pushing against them like before.

They took abnormal forms suitable for the name of Hyakki Yakou. Some of them had strong demon-like bodies, some wriggled like snakes, some grew feathers and were flying in the sky.

The rampage of Hyakki Yakou did not stop.

Takeru and others glared far into the sky.

On the trunk of the huge tree there was a white shadow. Besides it, there stood a girl with empty eyes. The shadow looked down on Takeru and others as if it was a God or something.

God's mouth drew an arc, and he spoke.

——What now, you worms.

"Ootori Sougetsu——————————————————!!!!!"

It was without doubt a declaration of war.

A manifestation of unshakable will saying "I'll kill you".

When Takeru pulled off his sword, everyone in the 35th platoon lined up by his side. Mari too, while stumbling, had lined up with them.

"...For now, let's save Kiseki-chan. Takeru's 《Ragnarøkkr Enchant》 can set her free, right?"

Takeru put a hand on Mari's shoulder.

"Mari, you rest for a little."

"Stupid, does this look like a situation to rest in? Heck, there's nowhere to rest, even."

"Yeah. So I'm saying you should restore even a little of your magic power before supporting us. To put it simply, I'll have you force yourself hard."

"Gooot it."

Next, he gave orders to Usagi and Ikaruga.

"Usagi, you give long range support to me and Ouka. Try to catch up somehow."

"Understood."

"Suginami, can you turn into an elf again?"

"I will even if I can't."

"Protect Mari and Usagi."

"Roger."

After giving orders to them, last, Takeru looked towards Ouka.

"Ouka, you——"

"I'm not moving an inch away from you."

Before he could give an order, Ouka glared fiercely at him and spoke.

"Tell me when you're turning into a God Hunter form. Make that priority."

To protect Takeru's soul, Ouka intended to take charge of releasing the God Hunter form. Takeru did not tell her that before long that will no longer be necessary.

"I'll stay by your side and protect you."

He felt like he was betraying her, but he was fine with it for now.

Even if he breaks the promise, this will be the last time.

"...Yeah. Let's go together. Be careful of his rifle."

"Prioritizing God Hunter form release and avoiding I will make an opening. You snatch Kiseki away no matter what."

"Yeah, that's what I intend to do...!"

He exhaled and stopped moving.

This was the situation they were in. Injured, tired and without a safe place to allow injured comrades to escape to.

That's why they decided to fight together. It was the last battle. The last battle they challenged together.

They could not——afford to lose it!

"Antimagic Academy's 35th Test Platoon——"

Takeru raised his sword and was clad in an armor.

And——

"——Mission, start!"

——The 35th platoon's last mission had began.

Chapter 3 - Burdened With a Planet

It has yet to be discovered just what actually is the "Despair" ancient property. In the long, long history, only three witches have been confirmed to be born with this property.

One of them was a child who had died in its mother's womb. The other two decided to polish their usage of the property.

But in the end, the two have finished their lives unable to master it. One of them had embarked on a quest to rediscover ancient magic and died of illness. The other had sought possibilities in another world, and touching a different world the Despair property allowed the witch to get in contract with, the witch went mad and died.

According to the history, there was no one who had mastered the usage of this property, but for some reasons there were continuous sightings of Despair magic left in the literature.

It had said that there was a person who caused the flowers of despair to bloom and ruled over aberrant magical creatures.

They said the person's identity, was the first one that was mentioned. The baby who suddenly disappeared from its mother's womb.

The rumor whispered among people sounded plausible.

It said that the fetus was summoned to another world, had a glimpse of what "Despair" was, and had returned to this world...

No one knew what the truth was. The only thing that could be said for certain, was that the man standing in front of Kurogane Hayato, was driven by despair and has become a menace.

Using Relic Eaters, Caligula and Maximillien, Hayato had attacked Haunted. Haunted who thanks to a contract with magical organisms from another world, had stocked up lives of the people he killed, should have had the live stock reduced to zero by summoning the mask.

But that didn't mean Hayato's situation had improved. Rather, previously he could see his own victory if he had only continued to kill Haunted, making it more advantageous. Seeing as Maximilien's blow couldn't bring Haunted down, it seemed it'll be harsh difficult battle――

――A roar rang out.

Hayato used Caligula to parry Haunted's slash. The power granted to Haunted by the Sacred Treasure was unbelievable. He was faster than Hayato and surpassed his power by far.

Even Hayato who was an unique existence called a "Hero Vessel" was unable to stand up to Haunted, who thanks to the Sacred Treasure had become a god's avatar.

Of course, strengthening wasn't all the Sacred Treasure had granted Haunted.

There was something else, more troublesome.

"——《Tindalos》"

An anomaly had appeared at the sharp edge of the sword he held. Something appeared from the edge. A sharp-headed creature walking on four legs had appeared from within. There were three of them. With their bodies looking like they were made out of bone or some kind of mineral, they charged straight at Hayato.

Hayato was unable to avoid the hounds' attack, it turned like a guided missile and headed straight for him. Although Hayato should have been faster, he was unable to avoid. It was as if they were reading his every move.

Which left him no choice but to destroy them.

He fired Caligula to kill the three hounds.

——But he missed. The hounds thrust their spear-sharp heads at Hayato's body. Thanks to the fact he was completely covered with armor their attacks were parried, but the cracks appeared in the hybrid Witch-Hunter armor.

Haunted immediately reappeared and let out a powerful thrust.

While staggering in response to hounds' attack, Hayato responded to Haunted's attack.

The sword and barrel clashed causing a shockwave.

It was the gun barrel that was parried away.

Hayato clenched his teeth and squeezed his fist, not to allow the gun to be blown away.

His opponent was above him when it came to power and speed. He had to account for the fact enemy the was faster, and seal the enemy's attacks. Until now, the only people he fought that were faster than him, were Kusanagi Orochi and Kusanagi Takeru.

There was only one way to cope with Haunted's speed. It was to read his movement and act first. Squeeze the trigger without hesitation. Hayato had one rule when it came to predicting enemy's movements, it was to be absolutely certain of his predictions.

While raised up by the impact, Hayato twisted the muscles in his body to reverse it and turned Caligula's muzzle towards Haunted, who tried to take pose for thrusting.

Seeing Hayato's judgment, Haunted whistled as if to say "as expected of you".

Caligula's bullet approached Haunted's mask.

He didn't try to avoid.

Instead——Haunted too, predicted Hayato's movement.

"——《Ithaqua》"

The Wind Eater.

It was instant, there was no chant or magic circle. What made it possible, was the Sacred Treasure mask.

An unknown black wind has risen and had literally *swept the bullet up*. As expected, not even Hayato could predict the magic he hasn't seen before. There was one bullet remaining in Caligula and he had no time to reload them.

To cancel the magic he fired Maximilien's bullet directly at——

——**Vwwoo...oon**

The wind Haunted was clad in had wailed.

It wasn't defensive magic. The thing covering Haunted's body rose up to the sky like a tornado.

When Hayato looked up, he saw the wind forming a shape of a huge humanoid. An extremely large wind giant. Its' two eyes shined as if burning.

The giant swung down the huge arm made out a tornado, straight at Hayato. As expected of wind, it was very fast. Its size exceeded the diffusion range Maximilien had.

There was no choice but to avoid it.

Exhausting magic power he——

"HA-HA!"

That's when Haunted swung his sword at the ground.

The earth has crumbled, pebbles and small fragments of rocks scattered all over.

Hayato immediately understood the meaning behind that move. The fragments of rocks had sharp and pointed parts on them, and from those sharp edges——the irregular hounds appeared once again.

They appeared from all the fragments. Their numbers were countless.

They appear from corners. Strange magical creatures.

Even under such circumstances Hayato calmly analyzed haunted. The hounds' tracking was probably by the sense of smell. Due to the nature of how his own movements were read, it was impossible to avoid them.

So, what do I do?

Hayato hesitated just slightly.

Just knowing how did the hounds work did not give him a way to resolve this. The giant's arm from above, hound charging from all around him. He was completely deprived of an escape route. He knew how the hounds worked, but knew nothing about the giant.

Therefore, Hayato decided to take on the attacks.

He won't know anything unless he does. It was a simple decision.

Endure it, that's all.

——**Vwooon**

The wind giant's both arms hit Hayato. The strange situation where he was struck by tornadoes from above had brought results beyond his expectations.

The tornado had sucked Hayato into the sky within a blink of an eye.

As if shot up from a cannon, Hayato's body was thrown into the clouds. The damage due to the sudden change in atmospheric pressure and temperature eroded his body.

Before he noticed, Hayato had nearly reached the stratosphere and was still spinning in the air.

From that point his sudden fall had started. For some reason, the air resistance had completely disappeared as he started falling. It was because of the black wind that stuck to his body when he was launched.

The gravity ruthlessly continued to accelerate Hayato's fall.

It was unexpectedly nasty. Much worse than just being thrown onto the ground.

If he continues to accelerate from this extreme altitude and finally crash onto the ground, he would surely die. Furthermore, if he smashed onto the ground as he is now, the entire school would be blown away. The only salvation was the fact that there was nothing left of it.

Hayato's Relic Eaters had no flight function like Vlad or Daji, and even if he could fly, he doubted he could deal with this black wind.

It would be fine if he could use Maximilien to release this black wind, but since the enemy was limiting the attack power, he couldn't deal with enchantment-type magic like this. Even if he ejected magic power at full throttle before crash, it probably wouldn't work. And this was too much for him to decelerate by ejecting magic power in small amounts.

He had to stop his fall. Hayato removed Caligula's cylinder latch and reloaded the bullet.

I'm not decelerating. There's not enough magic power to decelerate.

Hayato fired Caligula directly underneath.

I'll make a cushion.

Using the recoil from firing he slowed down slightly. It was a really insignificant amount.

Of course, his goal wasn't slowing down by using the recoil. Rather, *Hayato's falling speed was already beyond* that of the huge magic bullet he fired.

Therefore, Hayato moved on the bullet beneath received it on his body.

——**WHUD**

Hayato's armor broke from the impact, but thanks to that he was able to greatly slow down.

As he predicted, the magic bullet wasn't influenced by the wind the giant had stuck onto him. Magic bullet's fall sleep remained the same.

Hayato planned to slow down by receiving the magic bullet he himself fired.

And he repeated that action.

He couldn't let his guard down. There was still about a minute remaining before he reached the ground. If he doesn't repeat it, he will restore his speed. The moment his own falling speed exceeded that of a bullet, Hayato fired Caligula. Since he received Caligula's bullet, the damage was substantial.

Even though he devoted magic power to defense and regeneration, Hayato's body kept getting ragged out.

He vomited blood, which rose up to the sky because of air resistance.

However, if he only withstood a little longer, he would soon reach the ground——

"——Not so easy, huh."

He looked at the objects rising up from the ground far away. It was the group of hounds spread by Haunted right before Hayato was launched into the sky. They followed his smell and flew up to the sky.

It was impossible for him to avoid the pack as he fell. With the damage he received from bullets he used as cushion, there would be nothing left of him if he received their hounds' attacks.

There was literally nothing that could be done about it. Hayato had nothing he could do.

He clicked his tongue and stared at the approaching pack of hounds.

Of course, he didn't give up.

He had no means of action. That was a fact. But that was about Hayato by himself.

There was a way, but for that sake he needed help.

"...Hey, you're awake aren't you. It's about time you do some work."

He muttered as if to himself. Of course, Hayato was alone in the sky. It wasn't like he spoke through magic connection to anyone.

The one who he talked to was——the thing he held in his left hand.

"Situation's unfavorable——lend me your power, *Maximilien*."

Accepting the disadvantageous position, Hayato spoke to the silver gun.

"The Malleus Maleficarum “Maximilien”"

Its property was an ancient property "Revolution" and its shape was the Single Action Army.

Hayato gave an order to the personality that was part of the gun.

Answering it was——

《"To think you speak to me for the first time, and you immediately give me orders in a rude manner."》

——A very low, feminine voice that sounded like an embodiment of intimidation.

Just as she said, it was the first time Hayato spoke to her.

《"By the way, when did you notice I am equipped with a personality?"》

"There is no time. It's my first and last time speaking to you."

Upon contracting with her, Maximilien had no personality. It acquired its personality *after contracting* with Hayato.

In other words, the model for Maximilien's personality was Kurogane Hayato. He didn't think he would witness a Relic Eater's soul manifestation in his generation, but considering he was the first person to contract with Maximilien, it was natural. But why was it a woman? Hayato wondered about that, but since it was unimportant, he put that aside.

"Didn't you hear me? I told you to lend me your power."

《"Unlike Caligula, I have no intention of obeying you. If you want intrinsic magic, pay the price. My law doesn't allow anything but equivalent exchange."》

He felt like clicking his tongue again. Hearing her talk about law, he felt like he was talking to himself. While he thought in a hurry, Hayato's falling speed accelerated and the hounds have approached close to him.

"So this much of an unfavorable situation isn't enough, huh."

《"It's not. Although certainly you are at disadvantage, your body and mind are still intact. As expected of the strongest human, you have my praise. You're still perfectly fine."》

"…………"

《"I won't lend my power to someone who has yet to taste inferior position."》

Finally, he clicked his tongue for the second time. Hayato knew what was the price Maximilien had sought of him. That price was something Hayato had never felt in the past battles.

The price Maximilien sought was——a disadvantage.

In other words, being in a pinch. Only when he is physically and mentally cornered he can use Maximilien's intrinsic magic. To Hayato, who was never cornered in the past, this was a price he honestly couldn't understand.

The hounds approached him. Hayato didn't defend, spreading his arms instead.

"Such annoying price…!"

He put strength into his entrails. A spear-like sharp head thrust into his body.

If she required him to be even more disadvantageous, there was no choice but to give it to her. However, there would be no point if he died. He had to take on the hounds attacks and survive.

Resolve? Who cares about that. There was no need for a strong heart when tasting inferiority.

He had to accept everything as it was. There was no choice but to burn himself with the incoming fire.

Hayato received the incoming death head-on.

The hounds hit him directly. The first two bit into Hayato's legs. He couldn't feel the impact as the hounds pierced his legs and blew them off. After losing both legs, his right hand was blown off.

The pack of hounds was countless. They grabbed his neck, bit his sides. Even though he was hit by so many, there were still four remaining.

It was as if he collided with debris drifting in the outer space.

Next, were his lungs, Then half of his face.

Then finally——hounds approached his head and heart.

Since half of Hayato's chin and an eyeball were broken, he couldn't speak.

But he was alive. He was still alive.

He looked at the approaching hound by using his other eye.

At this moment, for the first time in his live——from the bottom of his heart, Hayato wished to live.

He had a responsibility of undertaking this in place of Kusanagi Takeru. His own law forced him to accomplish the mission for the sake of the comrades he lost.

Whenever he thinks about it coldly, it always flickered inside his mind. What he was entrusted with by that annoying boss of his.

And what he was entrusted with by the foolish junior of his, who tried to save everything.

I can't die in here!

I can't!

That's why——!

Lend me your power, Maximilien!

《"Don't hurry so much——very well, my master. *It's time for a revolution*."》

A silver magic circle appeared and magic was activated.

That power was literally a "revolution".

* * *

"Haa... you are the one who's a monster, Kurogane."

On the ground, Haunted looked up at the object shining in the sky while scratching the cheek of his mask.

Shining like a meteor, Kurogane Hayato headed straight for Haunted.

The damage Hayato took in the sky and all of 《Ithaqua》's black wind have disappeared as if they *didn't exist in the first place*. Instead, the silver muzzle was filled with incredibly destructive energy.

"That thing, he's probably changed the damage he received and the magical effects' into energy to shoot it, right?"

《"No, it probably doesn't just convert it to energy, but also multiplies it by dozens of times. The amount of damage he received and the energy in that gun don't add up, above all, it's an ancient property called "Revolution", after all."》

"This isn't a Daifugō, is it..."

Hmm, what do I do, wondered Haunted.

He couldn't maintain the mask for much longer. Although it was a Sacred Treasure, its summoning and deification was restricted to the followers.

As expected, he couldn't summon the Great Old Ones or the Outer Gods themselves, and since it was a restricted summoning he didn't become a god himself. Unlike Mistilteinn or Gungnir, he only becomes an incarnation through a contract. In the first place, the mythological world Haunted was contacting with had specialized in attaining spiritual damage, and granted few benefits in physical battle.

Spiritual damage probably won't work on him, and it'll take too much time... heck, there isn't much magical organisms I have acquainted myself with... how about I call 《Ithaqua》 once again and blow him away to the stratosphere again? No, if I do, the mask will disappear... what a bummer, I seriously went with intention to kill him, so why did he make such a turnaround?

This is bad. Summoning the Sacred Treasure by using the stock might have been a bad idea.

Kurogane Hayato had far exceeded Haunted's expectations, putting him under pressure.

As Haunted let out a dry laughter, his beloved sword, Dáinsleif, sighed.

《"Despite being my contractor you've summoned a Sacred Treasure, you cheater. Now fight him head-on."》

Agitated by Nacht, Haunted raised the mask from his face to his head and looked down on his sword.

Making a thin smile, he caressed the sword dearly.

"I guess... this might be the last time. Are you with me, Nacht?"

《"Don't stroke me, disgusting. As if you're really thinking it's the last time, no way in hell."》

"Oh, you can tell?"

《"How long do you think we're together now."》

"Together, oh, you make me blush."

《"Do you really have time to joke around?"》

As Nacht said, Kurogane Hayato had aimed Maximilien at Haunted and intended to release the energy he gathered from a distance.

Haunted rotated his arm to stretch his shoulders. Then, he lowered his hips and grasped Nacht deeply. He intended to thrust upwards.

"Very well——let's put everything into this one blow. Nacht, *overlap* the 《Berserk Enchant》."

《"No need to tell me."》

Nacht was clad in black aura. Haunted made the mask shine as if responding to Nacht. The black aura mixed and something like an irregular purple snake had wrapped around Haunted's body. The irregular shape had swelled like flame that was poured oil over and had formed a huge human shape.

Dread had covered Haunted's heart. Fear and desperation impossible to describe. There was an unpleasant feeling as if a maggot had rolled around his heart, and a pain as if a creature from the depths of the ocean had kept pecking on him.

It was a "negativeness" a person could not tolerate. A sane person would go crazy, pluck their own eyeballs and devote their own heart just to be saved.

However, Haunted did not go insane. For him, insanity was a perfectly normal human emotion. Madness didn't change the fact he was living a happy life. Madness felt the same as tears he spills when seeing a beautiful scene.

If madness was an emotion, then he should just hold that fear and pain-causing emotion dear, love it. Haunted adored this comfortable insanity. At the same time, the giant enveloping him had deliciously sipped on the madness caused by 《Berserk Enchant》.

The deep, deep black and purple auras mixed together, blooming. The fattened giant had mimicked Haunted's thrusting stance and strongly clenched its fists.

Hayato approached. Haunted raised his face.

Eyes glaring from beneath the mask were smothering delight.

And——

"Bless Me, Deep King——《Dagon Enchant》!"

The sword clad in madness was thrust into the sky. The giant too, had thrust its fists upwards.

Rather than jumping, it was flying. Giant-clad Haunted flew towards Hayato.

Hayato too, had aimed the muzzle at Haunted's forehead and squeezed the trigger.

"Heaven's Decree, Reformation——《Resistance》!"

The silver destruction let out a small amount of light. However, that brilliance was a destructive enregy that overturned any kind of phenomenon.

The final brilliance of the hero who had nearly fell into the abyss of death, and the despair that was granted power and protection by the abyss have clashed three hundred meters above the ground.

The spectacle made it seem as if another sun had suddenly appeared in the sky made even the Hyakki Yakou flowing on the school grounds to stop erosion.

To endure this much energy, one had to be a god or an existence close to that.

Only ashes and debris have remained after the battle.

A space distortion had continued to occur in the air as aftermath of the collision, it was accompanied by lightning which surrounded it.

After the collision, Kurogane Hayato immediately fell on his knees. It's been many years has it been since last time he struggled for his breath. Sweat dripping from his forehead had evaporated because of the heat coming from his body.

Maximilien's intrinsic magic 《Resistance》 had reset all events that hurt him and converted them into energy. Although it truly brought him back from a helpless situation, after using it he was completely drained of power.

There was no preservation. Only victory or defeat remained after the revolution.

"...Not even in the legends is there a hero who can stand up to a god's power."

The sound of footsteps have come from in front beaten-up Hayato.

As he looked upwards while staggering, he saw Haunted walking towards him.

The mask Haunted had on his face was crumbling.

What Hayato destroyed was just the Sacred Treasure. Its user, Haunted, was beat-up but his body was still in one piece.

"You really are something, you and your Relic Eater."

Haunted praised Hayato.

He wasn't dead. Even that destruction didn't give him a single death.

In other words——

"But unfortunately, it's my win...!"

——Defeat. The revolution was not accomplished.

Swinging his sword, Haunted walked towards Hayato. Hayato did not move. However, he glared at Haunted as if he hasn't given up yet——

Seeing that proud attitude, Haunted displayed his respect for it.

"——Hahaha! Nice, what a great expression. That's how it has to be. Indeed——that's what makes you worth slaughtering...!"

But he mocked Hayato at the same time. Breaking that will, intention not to give up and staining that prideful determination was the despair he wanted to grant Kurogane Hayato.

With pleasure he would grant Hayato despair.

"I'll be having everything you tried to protect."

When Haunted declared this, Hayato opened his mouth while glaring.

"...I don't mind. All yours."

"Oh? Ohh? Ohhh? What, you haven't given up yet, how stubborn. How about becoming honest?"

Stepping forward lightly, Haunted agitated Hayato. All the respect from earlier was gone, and he turned back to his usual self.

Despite everything, Hayato too has tasted various hardships and joys of life, so he had been stiffling things inside.

But he was not upset. He glared at Haunted as if to open up a hole in him.

"Do it. That's what you've come here for, isn't it."

"...What do you even know about me? Sorry, I have no such noble purpose. And above all else, I didn't come here to kill yo——"

"——Shut up. *I'm not talking to you.*"

"............?"

"Shut up and die, scum."

"............——————————!!!"

——That's when Haunted first noticed that Hayato's gaze wasn't directed towards himself.

What Hayato was looking at wasn't him, but behind him.

He was careless. Off guard. Literally.

Haunted reluctantly erased his grin and turned around in panic.

"I'm grateful. I lived——all for this moment."

——Before Haunted realized, a new voice came from behind him.

A voice he did not remember hearing.

However, to the owner of the voice, Haunted was an enemy. The hateful root of all evil. And now at the end of numerous sacrifices and sins, he finally received an opportunity.

A chance for revenge.

The avenger put the huge muzzle towards the back of his enemy.

"——Thousand Threat...!"

Along with his anger, the huge barrel split into thousand muzzles. Along with a rattling noise, the thousand barrels momentarily spread sideways like wings. Reminiscent of a missile pod for anti-aircraft combat, it completely deprived Haunted of escape route.

"!!"

While turning around Haunted swung his sword towards the avenger. That action was a folly caused by his impatience. He didn't expect to receive a surprise attack in this situation. He enjoyed combat too much to consider the possibility of someone ruining everything.

The thrust had only grazed the avenger's face.

Just by moving his head slightly, the avenger avoided Haunted's counterattack.

It was skill coming from tenacity.

Seeing avenger's eyes burning red, Haunted took a step back. Before he noticed, Hayato had evacuated from the place.

Haunted did not counterattack, he decided to escape just like Hayato did.

But the avenger didn't let him to, he wouldn't miss.

The avenger——would never forgive Haunted.

"Who the hell——wait, I don't even know yo——"

As Haunted panicked, the avenger clenched his teeth and exposed his fangs.

"Can't recall me? No wonder! Then so that you don't forget, remember well...!"

"......!!"

"I'm AntiMagic Academy's 15th Test Platoon's captain, Kirigaya Kyouya——"

"——The man who killed you!"

And the revenge was executed.

Putting his anger into thousand muzzles, Kirigaya Kyouya released everything. There was no escaping from the dark green shotgun pellets. Majority of Haunted's body was pierced by them.

"UuuUUUuUAUuAAAAaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaAAaAAAAAAAAAAaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

It wasn't a single salvo, but rapid fire from a thousand guns. It seemed like a celebration of revenge.

Haunted expanded protective magic, but it was pointless. It was easily broken. This attack was incredibly crude, barbarous and thoughtless.

However, the third-rate with an obsession could surpass a first-class. He put in the chagrin of his dead comrades, dead childhood friend, and the wish for his return of his living childhood friend. What burned inside him, was heart full of revenge.

Eating this delicious food, the Relic Eater "Nero" granted Kyouya his wish.

《"Now do it... Master! Let's show him what vengeance is!"》

Vengeance. Righteous judgment. Sweeping away the emptiness and granting death.

Exhaust all of the vengeance, all of the bullets. Until its completely empty.

And once everything was emptied the thousand barrels crumbled down, and what remained...

Was just Haunted's head.

It fell on the ground and rolled around as he spat blood.

Haunted looked up at Kyouya from behind the gaps in blond hair. Despite not having lungs, he struggled for breath, desperately wanting to live.

"...Stop...screwing...with me... I won't... die in a place...like..."

"..........."

"Not to a guy... like thisss..."

Raising voice full of regret, Haunted spilled tears.

Kyouya moved the shotgun he had leaned on his shoulder, Nero, and aimed it Haunted's head in silence.

And,

"Farewell."

He fired the last bullet into the enemy's head.

Haunted's head exploded like a fruit.

The last roar extended in to the sky in celebration.

Kyouya lowered his shoulders and quietly turned his face towards the sky.

The sound of the last gunshot echoed before disappearing.

He felt the flames of revenge be purified and disappear from his body.

Inside of his chest turned empty.

Raising a trembling hand, Kyouya put it on his shoulder. There, were the star emblems of his comrades who were killed by Haunted during the mock battle tournament. The 15th test platoon's emblem.

The heavy burden he felt on his shoulders faded away. Disappeared. By fulfilling his revenge he was convinced his comrades' souls were saved, and holding the stars on his shoulder he fell on his knees.

After finishing everything, finally... finally shed tears for his comrades.

"...I'm sorry... everyone... I couldn't protect you..."

Rather than tell them that he fulfilled revenge, Kyouya apologized to everyone.

"...Forgive me with this... I won't say we're square... but please, forgive me."

There was as many regrets and sorrows of his, as the number of tears falling on the ground. Even if he wasn't understood by anyone, even if he was mediocre and normal, he had a reason to fight.

And a reason to continue living from now on as well.

"I'd like to go over there... but I still... have something I want to protect."

Kyouya kept apologizing to his comrades. While recalling the happy days when he discussed with his comrades in the platoon room on how to improve their results, he thought of the childhood friend awaiting his return.

"That's why... it's fine... to live just a little longer, right?"

Holding five stars in his hand, Kyouya stood up.

In order to live.

In order to return to Akira's side.

In order to walk a path other than that of vengeance.

Chapter 4 - Total War

"...This feels a little strange."

While staring at the chaos beneath, Ootori Sougetsu felt a slight discomfort. Now that Takeru knew his identity as the God of this world, he could no longer act roundabout like he used to.

It was necessary to direct Takeru's hatred towards himself. The method was simple. Have Kiseki kill his comrades and then have her suicide. That's when Takeru will lose his sanity and become a complete God-Hunter out of his own will.

Along with the God's death, the world will be destroyed.

That was the scenario Sougetsu came up with. The greatest destruction he had desired.

Originally he was supposed to keep the fact of him being the God a secret, and have Takeru kill him while unaware of that fact.

His schedule went crazy. It was because of that traitor, the ex-captain of EXE, Mineshiro Kazuma. Although Sougetsu broke Mineshiro's fangs, they ended up falling right beside Sougetsu's heart.

Still, that did not mean things wouldn't go the way Sougetsu wanted them to. He knew the nature of the man called Kusanagi Takeru, his attachment to his comrades, his love for his little sister. If Sougetsu robbed Takeru of these, Taker would surely come to kill him.

That's why the information provided by Mineshiro Kazuma was not a problem.

If there was a problem, it would be...

"That intent to kill was normal."

The murderous intent Takeru directed towards him.

That killing intent was a problem.

Although Takeru did direct a real killing intent at him before, it always included "hesitation". In the current state, with his comrades and sister alive, he definitely wouldn't kill the God. That's why it was natural for him to hesitate in his intent to kill.

"............But that's the real thing."

He felt it when Takeru screamed his name, a chill that stung his skin. That was certainly, a manifestation of the real intent to kill.

——It felt just like the intent to kill Kusanagi Orochi had directed towards him.

"...It can't be."

Sougetsu paled in confusion.

Orochi was dead. His goal and Takeru's goal could not overlap with each other no matter what, he knew that ever since he first met Takeru. That's why he knew Takeru would come back when he was kidnapped to Magic Academy by Orochi.

He was also convinced that Orochi would not tell Takeru the truth about his identity. Orochi was not a fool. He knew that there was no need to tell Takeru the truth considering they would fight one another.

On the other hand, he could also assert that Orochi would not kill Takeru. He, who lost Kusanagi Mikoto would not bring himself to kill a relative. Moreover, because of the contract with Gungnir, Orochi's body was at its limits and he had no power or time left to oppose a God-Slayer. That's why rather than to destroy Takeru and Mistilteinn, he would rather use the remaining power he had to become a God.

Takeru learning of the world's truth should have been a miscalculation from Orochi's and Gungnir's point of view as well. The number of their opponents increased and they ended up battling against one another, resulting in their power running out and defeat. As a result, as the one with destruction as his goal, Sougetsu was able to get rid of the most vigilant enemy, which had benefited him.

However, a thought that he might have been wrong, had appeared in his head just now.

——It might have been the worst miscalculation so far.

Sougetsu's miscalculation was not being there, when Takeru killed Orochi.

There was no mistake that Orochi had died.

If they interacted afterwards and Orochi with Gungnir had given something to Takeru——

If it was something connected to Takeru's killing intent——

"…………"

Sougetsu squinted, passing through his head was the last moment of Hoshijiro Nagaru.

Hoshijiro Nagaru, who was the same mythological existence as him, had given up her life to slow him down back on the fragment of the mythological world.

She gave up her life to slow him down.

He noticed, and realized that he *should have hurried*.

Hoshijiro Nagaru had decided that it was worth exchanging her life to retain him on the fragment of mythological world. If Hoshijiro Nagaru was in contact with Orochi, there might have been a reason for her to give up her life in there. No, even if they weren't, Hoshijiro Nagaru might have predicted what was happening and gave up her life.

There was a possibility that Orochi, Nagaru and even Gungnir have intended to do this right from the start. In case they were unable to alter the world themselves, they would entrust it to Takeru and others.

Back then for just a few hours, Sougetsu wasn't here, in this world.

He did not know what happened in here.

And while he wasn't there, the two fought, and Orochi was beaten.

Orochi died. But what about Gungnir? Did that fox perish along with Orochi? What if she was not destroyed, but cancelled the contract and survived?

And what did she give them, while he wasn't here?

What was it?

"..."Deification"...!"

As the truth came to his mind, Sougetsu's mouth formed an arc, but he grit his teeth at the same time.

The only thing that gave right to become the God was Gungnir which had combined the performance of God-Hunting and Deification. The god-slaying Sacred Treasure Lævateinn did not have the deification function.

Mistilteinn too, was merely a reproduction of Gungnir. A faulty reproduction that had only copied the god-slaying characteristics. As a countermeasure against gods, it was made to "Absorb Magic Power" that gods had.

A degraded copy, that was a suitable name for it. The only thing the old humanity required, was the Sacred Treasure's ability of "God-Hunting". That was enough.

However, what if using 《Twilight Enchant》 Mistilteinn had absorbed God's Authority and used it without converting to its own magic power?

What if Mistilteinn was given the operative procedure for "Deification" from Gungnir?

——Would it not become possible for Kusanagi Takeru and Mistilteinn to become the God of this world?

The probability was small. A demon's soul and a real Sacred Treasure were one thing, but a demon's soul and a Sacred Treasure's replica combination didn't make it sound realistic.

However, he could not state it was impossible.

Sougetsu opened his eyes wide and covered his face with one hand.

"Ha... hahaha... What a system... It never goes as I want it to, this world....!"

He cursed this world's system.

Created as a god-slaying being he was supposed to have destroyed humans along gods. However, gods have put on futile resistance and caused the collision of worlds resulting in a chaotic world where god's and human's worlds have intermingled.

Sougetsu considered this world abominable, yet loved it at the same time. Considering the meaning of his life was to kill gods, destroying this world which was filled with magic that was a godly element, had become his reason to live.

With great joy he had been aiming for this world destruction. However, once again obstructing his destruction, was the legacy of gods.

At this rate, everything would repeat itself. And there was a possibility of defeat.

The world will continue to exist, despite being a step away from destruction.

Sougetsu relaxed his body and looked up at the dark, cloudy sky.

Destruction had become distant.

His wish had become distant.

If Takeru and Mistilteinn kill Sougetsu and become the God, the world will continue to exist.

To bring destruction upon this time, there was no choice but to draw and die simultaneously.

It wasn't realistic. He couldn't leave this world's destruction up to a draw.

Sougetsu only bet when he was playing around with human hearts.

He would never bet with his wish.

"............Very well."

He clapped his hands and looked away from the sky.

Having his wish right in front of him just earlier, Sougetsu decided to stop reaching out to it.

Mistilteinn and Kusanagi Takeru.

The only means for him to kill himself. One and only existence in this world capable of destroying this world.

That's how important a chess piece Takeru was for Sougetsu.

A mere weapon of suicide, a pathetic, pitiful pawn that danced like Sougetsu wanted him to... was to stop his destruction and become the God?

Ridiculous.

It was too ridiculous, therefore——

"So, I just have to kill you."

——I will crush you with all I have, Sougetsu vowed.

A wind blown upwards from the ground, swaying his hair.

Spreading his both arms, he looked down on Takeru. The circumstances have become reversed. Even though he was overwhelmingly advantageous when it came to battle power, it made no difference in this case. For Sougetsu personally, he was at a disadvantage.

He experienced this for the first time. Was inferiority really such dreadful thing? It was the worst. Just because of possibility of being killed, he's turned good-for-nothing. He could no longer look at things from a high perspective. If he's killed, he loses.

Therefore.

He had no choice but to continue living.

Sougetsu picked a draw.

"Killing you and *aiming for destruction anew* doesn't sound too bad. Mmm, it might even be fun."

He chose to continue.

"The old humanity has accomplished replication of a Sacred Treasure... one day it should become possible again. I will make it possible...!"

The real goal in creating of Relic Eaters was to artificially create a Sacred Treasure. To say, Relic Eaters were failed creations of Sacred Treasure. He tried to extract power from Mistilteinn, but it turned out impossible to do without contracting with a person who had a non-human soul.

Therefore Sougetsu tried to make it come true with the remaining gods' power inside him.

But in the end, it was his own power. A Gods' logic was that they could not kill themselves. With Sougetsu's power itself, it was impossible to draw out a God-Hunter's power.

That's why instead of creating a Sacred Treasure, he made Takeru and Mistilteinn form a contract, trying to kill himself using them. Thinking of it now, it was a mistake.

That mistake followed further. Women of Kusanagi household inherited only the body of demons, not knowing they did not inherit demons' souls he first made Mistilteinn contract with Kusanagi Mikoto which resulted with Mistilteinn forming Lapis' personality. As he thought about it, there was no end to his miscalculations.

"I guess it's my fault for being lazy. *This is how* it ends up. It's about time I finally learn."

Joyfully, angrily, Sougetsu reflected on this result.

And with delight, he looked forward to next destruction. If they had become an existence aiming for the seat of God, just in case, he could not leave Kusanagi Takeru and Mistilteinn alive.

That's interesting. The difficulty level went up. So far there was only victory or draw, but now a possibility of defeat appeared. As a god of destruction, he felt it become worthwhile.

"Kusanagi-kun. From now on I shall face you not as my pawn, but as my enemy."

The child of demons who had cut down countless fantastical beings, God-Hunter's contractor. If you are to take off your collar and stand up to me, I, Ootori Sougetsu shall not show mercy.

Very well. I shall break those fangs.

Sougetsu had once again spoke to them the same words. Not as the chairman of the AntiMagic Academy nor the chairman of the Inquisition——but as this world's God.

"——Come at me, you worms...!"

In the swirling darkness, on the branch of the red tree, Ootori Sougetsu made a wide cat-like smile.

Losing Kiseki's control the Hyakki Yakou stopped swallowing the world. That's what Ootori Sougetsu ordered it.

No matter how much Hyakki Yakou ruins the world, no matter how much it takes away, the world will not be destroyed. The land, the air, the sky, the entire universe will continue to exist unchanged. It was no good.

Sougetsu who chose to continue living, had aimed Hyakki Yakou not at the world, but at an individual.

At a fool who was a God-Hunter yet attempted to become the God at the same time——at Kusanagi Takeru.

* * *

《"Host...!"》

Hearing Lapis' voice, Takeru stopped moving towards the big tree. The earth trembled and the ground beneath Takeru cracked.

"Again...?!"

In addition, leaves on branches of the big tree have turned into liquid and white-ish eyeballs appeared on them, countless mouths bared teeth and let out ear-splitting screams as the leaves turned into deformed monsters.

Even as they killed them, there were countless more. They continued to flow in from ahead.

"Haa... haa... there's no end to them...!"

Firing aurora bullets, Usagi made way by erasing the demon army in front of them.

Every time they moved forward, Hyakki Yakou had flowed down on them.

Still, they were able to proceed. If they move closer to the tree little by little, to where Kiseki is ——they will be able to reach Ootori Sougetsu.

《"Kusanagi! Hyakki Yakou is acting strange! The spread cells are converging in one point!"》

Ouka reported from the sky through the magic connection.

"What do you mean...?!"

"Don't know, but be careful... the concentrating bits are——"

She paused there, and descended from the sky towards Takeru.

"...Beneath us!"

The moment Ouka landed, the vibrations beneath that spread every time Hyakki Yakou wriggled had come to stop.

Silence. Silence appearing in this situation felt nothing but sinister.

About five meters in front of Takeru something was wriggling inside the crack.

It was a life-sized demon that looked like a woman.

Clad in dark red miasma thick enough to be visible with the naked eye. Her hair was long enough to reach the ground and she had four arms with long claws. She had cracked pale skin, unthinkable to be that of a human's. Her appearance wearing a blood-stained white kimono made Takeru think of an ancient princess.

She wasn't a cell with undetermined form nor incarnation and felt like a proper individual.

Her appearance was somewhat reminiscent of Kiseki, but Takeru understood at a glance that her essence was completely different.

A fear he had never felt before had penetrated him from his feet up to his brain.

This one's dangerous. Takeru's soul warned him to run away, and at the same time unconsciously called for him to destroy it. He did not know why was his soul so contradictory, but it was something caused by the fact he was born into the bloodline called "Kusanagi".

The clan of demon-hunters, Kusanagi.

And the variant that appeared in front of him——could only be described as a "demon".

It wasn't a demon like Kiseki or other Kusanagi women, where they became ones as a result of curse. The curse was kneaded and hardened and concentrated on one point, completing this variant.

She wasn't part of Kiseki's body, more like the root of Kiseki's power, *the source of Hyakki Yakou*. The curse put on Kusanagi had reproduced a demon that was destroyed by Kusanagi's long ago.

It was just like summoning magic.

With the long hair flowing down her back, the demon opened her mouth.

Her mouth was lined with a number of small teeth, opening it so wide it seemed like her jaw was dislocated, she turned her face towards the sky. Raising a slender hand, the demon made a vermilion magic circle appear beneath her feet.

Unlike on magic circles used by Mari and others, numerous letters that seemed like cursed symbols have invaded the ground.

《"HATEFUL KUREHA CHILD OF DEMON BLOOM'D CRIMSON CHILD OF DEMON FEAST ON A WEEPING CHILD AND BLOOM CRIMSON THE PREGNANT WOMAN, THE UNBORN CHILD WHEN WILL THE CHILD OF DEMON COMETH FORTH?"》

Hyakki Yakou started chanting using old language.

It wasn't just Takeru who trembled, unable to move. The other three members of the platoon also had their conscious blown away by fear.

Takeru clenched his teeth and lowered his hips.

That thing is dangerous.

He had to stop it before activating, otherwise the entire location would be eliminated.

"Ouka!"

When Takeru yelled, trembling Ouka had came back to herself.

"——We're stopping it!"

At the same time he kicked off the ground. Closing in the distance all at once, he charged at the demon.

He didn't know where were her weaknesses, or whether they even existed in the first place. He attacked her head at full power with the full-powered Unicorn Destructive Lance.

However——before the thrust reached Hyakki Yakou, it was blocked by a red barrier.

The stake Ouka had fired right after Takeru also was defended the same way.

《"Protective barrier... so this is the "Demon" property magic...!"》

"If it's magic——then...!"

《"Activating "Twilight Enchantment"!"》

He mitigated the recoil from having his attack blocked by standing his ground, then once again charged at the Hyakki Yakou.

The blade clad in azure-colored flames had slashed onto the barrier at once.

A moment after the impact, the flames started absorbing magic.

No magic could stand up to Mistilteinn. It's all absorbed and becomes her power.

《"——?! Aghh——!"》

And yet, Lapis who was absorbing magic – screamed, and the 《Twilight Enchantment》 was interrupted. Demon magic power that was being absorbed had spouted from the blade. It was as if the sword had rejected and spat it out.

Again, the attack was blocked and Takeru took a step back.

"Lapis, what happened?!"

Takeru asked. Lapis answered him even while panting in pain.

《"I-I don't know... the absorbed magic power, it... *it tried to erode me...*"》

Although she was in the shape of a sword, he could feel Lapis tremble slightly.

This has never happened before. The undetermined ancient property "Demon". It was an unknown power that was uncertain to even be magic power. When they were in God-Hunter form nothing happened when they absorbed it, so why now...

《 "...Its nature might have mutated when... the magic was formed. It's my first time seeing something like this...!"》

Even while fixing his sword stance, Takeru grit his teeth.

Absorption with enchantment was too dangerous. It was unbeatable against magical opponents so far, but no one would have thought the absorbed magic power would fight back.

Magic the demon had concentrated in its hands has formed a big reddish-black sphere. Several eyeballs have been implanted into it and it looked like a distorted meat lump reminiscent of an egg.

If it activates, probably it'll be all over. Despite being on his way to kill the God, he had his way blocked by a demon. He did not have the time to waste here, but at this rate they would be destroyed before the world is.

"It's not working! I don't know the operative procedure, so I can't pierce it...!"

Ouka moved to Hyakki Yakou's side and tried to pierce it with a stake, but everything was blocked.

"Crush it by force!"

She had the guns disappear and made a stake-releasing mechanism appear instead.

"Wait, Ouka! That barrier is——!"

Before Takeru's voice reached her, Ouka had pierced her fang into the barrier.

The fang pushed against the barrier.

《"...Such density...! But I'll force it down——!"》

Ouka focused her gaze as she attempted to break through the barrier.

Cracks appeared on the barrier as it was near breaking, but then.

——A chill ran down Ouka's back.

Eerily, an eye appeared on the tip of the fang colliding with the barrier.

Numerous eyes emerged on the fang's surface, like bubbles.

"——What?!"

Ouka hurriedly released magic and the fang disappeared.

That decision was correct.

《"It eroded magic…!"》

Were she to continue, the fang would have been eroded by Hyakki Yakou. With its magic power eroded, even a Relic Eater would be eroded by Hyakki Yakou. If that happened, it was unknown what it would result with.

Feeling danger, Ouka tried moving away from the demon.

Seeming to have sensed Ouka's movements, the demon acted. Spreading out *another pair of arms* she made a magic bullet appear and stretching her hand she pressed it against Ouka. It seemed like it was possible to pass through the barrier from the inside. The female demon's arm extended and bent like a whip as it slipped through the wall.

Ouka gasped. Arms extended up to her side started glowing with vermilion color.

Takeru moved.

Ejecting magic power he closed the distance to Ouka in an instant and cut the demon's arm from above. He wasn't able to cut it off, but the arm was pushed away.

Ahead of where it extended to, the magic bullet burst out and along with a sound of a woman's scream, something that looked like a mass of human bodies had burst in all directions.

Takeru landed, raised his face, and immediately leaped again.

There was one more arm with a magic bullet in hand.

Ahead of where it extended to, were Mari and Usagi.

Seeing Ikaruga turn into an elf and try to create a barrier, Takeru yelled.

"Don't use magic! Usagi!"

Ikaruga stopped moving, instead, Usagi raised her rifle.

"——Fhh…!!"

Adjusting her breathing to one particular for snipers, she squeezed the trigger. She fired an anti-magic bullet at the demon arm that extended while wriggling and was near them.

Were she to be late even if just by a second, the magic bullet would directly hit them and exploded. After waiting for the moment arm's movement stopped, Takeru leaped. After moving next to Usagi, he *kicked away the arm powerfully*.

The arm was blown upwards and the magic bullet burst in the sky.

However, this was a mistake.

《"——Host!"》

Although he was able to prevent the magic bullet's explosion, there was an abnormality on his right leg he used to kick the demon's arm.

Numerous eyes appeared on the armor he had on his right leg.

Lapis instantly released the Witch-Hunter form and scattered the armor. Losing Witch-Hunter's strengthening, Takeru landed on the ground and staggered before holding his body up by using the sword instead of a cane.

The arm that was blown away had returned to Hyakki Yakou with a slithering sound.

The crystallization of demons inside the barrier that the demon was trying to activate, was already as big as a car.

Takeru breathed roughly as he thought of what to do.

《"Witch-Hunter form is also magic... it appears its invulnerable to everything else but physical attacks."》

"So we won't get eroded if we attack physically, huh."

《"Most likely. My main body that is the sword was not eroded. However..."》

Though, just by understanding that their situation did not improve. While the demon built big magic with one pair of arms, it used the other pair flexibly.

Takeru resolved himself and raised his sword. Ouka must have guessed what was he thinking, as she released the vampire form and pulled out the handgun from her waist.

"...We have to beat her without using magic."

His hand clenching the sheath trembled.

It wasn't shivering due to fear, it were convulsions. Takeru himself, no longer had the sensation of holding a sword.

* * *

The crystallization of demon's curse. Looking down at the ancient demon created by concentrating the curse, Sougetsu peeked at Kiseki standing next to him.

Demons. Beings that terrorized old Japan's ancient era, fantastical organisms destroyed by members of Kusanagi clan. Of course, Sougetsu did see them before.

However, that was merely a single demon.

Holding the undetermined ancient magic property "Demon", she was hailed as the queen of demons.

Her power, even a little of it, did erode everything in existence and created new demons. Old Japanese took this characteristic as reincarnation and feared her.

The reason Kusanagis have inherited the demons, was because their power was sealed inside Kusanagi's bloodline in order to prevent demons' resurrection. The method used for sealing it was unknown even to Sougetsu. According to a theory, onymouji's have summoned a Japanese mythology's Sacred Treasure and using it they sealed the power inside Kusanagis, but Sougetsu didn't know the details.

Soul into men. Power into women. The distribution of this seal was a desperate measure meant for preventing demons' complete revival.

Were the child be born with both a body and a soul of a demon, it would be nothing but a demon.

That seal was handed down to their descendants but kept weakening, the demon power continued to swell inside Kusanagi women's bodies' and finally reaching Kiseki, was pretty much released.

"If a being with a demon soul and body is a demon... then how do we call a demon without a soul?"

A soulless demon. As a result of Sougetsu taking control of Kiseki's soul, the empty shell of an ancient demon was unleashed from its seal and took form of that woman.

And was holding that mass of meat.

That sight was just like that of a mother's giving birth to a child.

"Now then... I have no idea what will come out. I look forward to it."

Even now, that he put away the destruction in time, Hyakki Yakou was his strongest card.

The power of demons could not kill the God, but it was enough to kill Kusanagi Takeru.

But that would be too boring.

The path of destruction is far away. The days full of entertainment are waiting.

So to start with how about we have demons return to the world, Sougetsu thought.

"What she needs inside there is... probably you... Kusanagi-kun."

It wasn't his style to act himself and he wasn't suitable for that kind o thing. Sougetsu's power as a God was scattered during the reconstruction and he didn't have much power to fight by himself.

That's why,

"How convenient. Before you reach me, you will have that soul of yours stolen by a demon."

As expected, same as always, I'll just look at everything from above.

Leaning Innocentius on his shoulder, Sougetsu looked up at the sky.

A bright red moon was peeking out from behind the clouds.

* * *

He knew from the start it would be a difficult battle.

Takeru was reminded of how much did he rely on power of magic... how much he relied on Lapis.

Now that he lost the benefit of strengthening magic from Witch-Hunter form, he was about to reach his limit. It was even worse than losing sense of pain as his forcibly-moved body has been coming close to becoming unable to move.

He couldn't do anything about his trembling limbs with his will alone. Occasionally his field of view narrowed and sounds have grown distant as if he covered his ears. Aside from the physical burden, his brain was at its limits.

Even as he protected himself from the demon's claws, his body was slightly blown away.

Although he did brace himself to kill the impact, his trembling legs could not support his body and they folded. He wasn't in pain, but his heart beat fast and he was out of breath.

The demon's arms grew and with sharp nails tried to rupture Takeru.

"——Ghh!"

Unable to avoid or return attack, Takeru tried to use the claymore as a shield.

Using the nanomachines Ikaruga made a shield. Although more than a shield it was more of a simple plate, the blue crystal's antimagic performance was the real thing.

After blocking the attack, Ouka immediately returned fire with handguns. Although it seemed like anti-magic weapons were effective, they did not deal any serious damage. After moving away from the arms that attacked her, the demon has remained inside the barrier and did not try to move outside.

Unable to use Vlad, Ouka tasted the same feelings as Takeru.

"Takeru, you okay?!"

While remaining wary of the demon, Ouka turned her back towards Takeru. Feeling pitiful that he cannot say he's all right, Takeru stood up by using the sword as a support.

"Sorry... I'm holding you guys back..."

"You're the one who's exhausted the most. Don't force yourself."

"Haha... y'know what you're even saying? No choice but to force myself now."

"I guess you're all right if you can waste your breath."

Damn you, he wanted to respond, but his breathing was so rough he couldn't say a word.

While maintaining a spherical barrier that covered her entire body, the demon prepared some unknown large-scale magic and protected herself from physical attacks with the second set of arms.

The moment anyone approached within ten meters of her, she swung her arms at high speed like whips.

It would be safe to say that it was a perfect defense. Despite being a demon, she fought like a witch.

The mass of meat the demon was holding in its arms grew even larger and looked reminiscent of a fetus. They had to stop it before it activated.

Although the erosion has stopped, even as the demon was casting the big magic, the leaves falling from the giant tree continued to turn into demon incarnations and attack.

Stopping them, were Mari and Ikaruga. Ikaruga created defensive barriers and Mari wiped out the demons that passed through the imperfect barriers. Mari's magic power hasn't recovered in such a short time, so just like with Mother Goose, she inscribed 《Drain》 seal on Ikaruga's body and used magic by absorbing magic power from elf-turned Ikaruga.

While deflecting attacks with whip-like arms, the demon watched their movements.

She took a stance that was completely defensive. The arm-whips with glittering nails were adjusted in our direction and set-up like a snake.

"She's coming, prepare...!"

"Usagi, how much anti-magic bullets you have left?!"

Takeru asked, and in response Usagi, who was kneeling on one knee gave her report.

"Three weiss crystal bullets."

"Focus on one spot. Anti-magic bullets should be able to pierce...!"

Weiss Crystal had the strongest material with the highest anti-magic power. It pierced through normal defenses like they were paper.

Ouka's 《Earl's Fang》 was eroded because it was magical, but a simple physical attacks aren't absorbed and make cracks in the barrier.

If fired at with a rifle and a weiss crystal bullets, it was possible they would break through.

"After Usagi fires all shots... I'll finish her off...!"

Takeru took off his uniform's necktie and wrapped it around his hand on the sword's handle, which was still trembling. After tying it tightly with his teeth, he glared at the demon.

"I'll... hunt that demon down...!"

There was an emotion inside Takeru which told him "not to forgive" the demon. It was probably the Kusanagi blood that was flowing inside his veins. The demon curse that tormented Kiseki all this time was now right in front of him, there was no reason to withhold his anger.

The demon that took shape of that woman in order to give birth to that piece of meat.

He didn't think he could cut down the curse on Kusanagi. It wasn't like the demon inside Kiseki would disappear.

And yet, there was no choice but to defeat it here.

"It's reckless... is what I can't say. Show me what you've got, captain."

Still turned with her back to him, Ouka instigated Takeru. He furrowed his eyebrows and made a bitter smile.

How nostalgic, he thought. They were the words Ouka said to Takeru when they went out on the first mission. They did really well to survive so far.

"We can't hold out much longer! It's up to you, Takeru!"

"To think I would end up becoming a fuel tank... Kusanagi, give me a massage once we're home."

Receiving Mari's and Ikaruga's encouragement, Takeru raised the sword.

"I will not miss at this distance. Leave it to me."

Usagi put the second weiss crystal bullet in her mouth and pulled the bolt.

《"Ready any time, Host."》

Having his back pushed by Lapis, Takeru nodded.

He lowered his waist to gather power in it and took a posture twisting his bones and muscles.

Closing his eyes, he slightly *loosened his concentration*. He stopped controlling the brain functions just a little, releasing the double-edged power.

Sound grew distant, the world has turned slow. Smell disappeared, other sensations in his body were already gone.

When he got rid of everything that obstructed him——Takeru opened his eyes.

"——Let's go!"

""Roger!""

Immediately after, Ouka moved forward.

Rushing in while holding a shield and a handgun she attracted the demon's attacks.

——**hyoop**!

Along with a sound of air being cut, an arm extended like a whip and slashed at Ouka with claws. The blue crystal shield absorbed the attack excellently, though a normal shield would be cut apart like a piece of cake and Ouka would have been blown away by the impact.

And yet, it withstood. Even if just for a short time, it gave them the moment required for victory.

"Saionji!"

While protecting herself from the demon's furious attacks Ouka cried out. Usagi squeezed the trigger, releasing weiss crystal bullet. A sound of bursting has come out and a pure white bullet point approached the barrier.

It landed on the barrier. However, it only caused the barrier to undulate like water's surface and did not break it.

There was no time to feel shaken. Usagi loaded another bullet.

"?!"

While the empty case danced in the air, the demon's arm that had been aiming at Ouka had bent again and stretched for Usagi this time.

Ouka attacked the arms with handguns, but with just a handgun-level of firepower she was unable to change their trajectory.

Takeru didn't move. Retaining his stance he continued to gather strength.

——The reason he didn't move, was because he believed in his comrades.

Momentarily, a mithril wall appeared in front of Usagi. The demon's claw pierced into the mithril wall and it stopped.

It was Ikaruga. Using nanomachines she converted the ground beneath Usagi into anti-magic material and built a wall. In exchange, the barrier she has been maintaining has disappeared. Using nanomachines while maintaining the barrier was s till impossible for Ikaruga.

"Nikaido!"

"I know!"

Mari replied and used Ikaruga's magic power in order to expand a barrier instead of her. The tsunami of Hyakki Yakou demon's incarnations that tried to break through was halted again.

At the same time, Usagi acted. Peeking out from behind the mithril wall in front of her, she fired.

Bullet landed. Of course, right on target. And yet, there was no change in the barrier.

Usagi pulled out the last bullet from her mouth and put it inside the gun.

She believed. She believed that this one shot will connect them to victory. That's why she did not hesitate.

It's the sniper who always overturns the current battle situation. Next bullet loaded. The demon moved before the last shot was released and attacked Usagi along with bizarre scream.

Usagi didn't move. She focused on firing the bullet.

——Because she believed.

Ouka slipped in from the side to Usagi and prevented the attack with a shield. As a result of blocking it, the blue crystal shield shattered.

The enemy's claws approached Ouka's open belly.

But she did not resolve herself to die or anything.

——Because she believed.

Usagi's beloved gun, Rabbit Fang peeked out from below Ouka's armpit.

Looking only in front, Usagi squeezed the trigger.

The last bullet was fired and flew straight for the barrier.

CRACKLE...!

The sound of barrier crumbling had echoed. Usagi's last bullet passed through the slight opening in the barrier which cracked away.

It passed through the barrier——and pierced into the demon's forehead.

The demon's scream reverberated inside everyone's ears. The claw which was about to slash Ouka had deviated from its trajectory and only scratched her forehead.

However——the demon was alive and the large-scale magic wasn't interrupted. The barrier was also maintained.

While breaking through the barrier, the bullet's power dropped and it wasn't sufficient.

A failure.

No——none of them would give up just because of this.

Everyone in here——believed in him.

"Well done, Usagi."

Usagi smiled proudly as she glared at the demon.

These were the words she heard many times already. This time too, she smiled as if to say "naturally".

Takeru's eyes, who has been standing still behind Usagi, have shined red in the faint darkness.

The strength he gathered has resulted in loud crackling noises, ready for release. He no longer felt pain. Even though his body was broken, his bright eyes showed that his will was not.

He let it out.

The power that defined him——his swordsmanship.

"Unicorn's——Destructive Lance!!"

Kicking off the ground, Takeru set free the gathered energy. Taking advantage of the springs all over his body he charged at Hyakki Yakou.

Inside the slow-motion world Takeru felt his bones crack, but he had no time to bother with that.

Concentrating his power in a single point he struck the barrier. Takeru screwed in the sword inside the gap through which the bullet has passed.

With a loud sound, the crackle made by Usagi in the barrier has spread throughout the barrier.

Hyakki Yakou has wound back the arms it used to attack Usagi and Ouka, to use them to push Takeru away from the barrier. But her attack was hindered by Usagi and Ouka.

The sword and the barrier collided, struggling against each other.

It wasn't enough. He needed one more decisive step until the barrier is completely crushed.

Takeru squinted and instructed Lapis.

"Lapis, a kodachi...!"

《"Understood."》

Lapis responded to his order and had a kodachi appear in mid-air.

Takeru caught the kodachi with his left hand and——pierced the crack in the barrier with it.

Taking his hand off the small kodachi stuck in the barrier, he stepped in with his left leg.

"Double-Edged style——Monk with Iron mallet!"

And with strong momentum he thrust his left knee, hitting the handle of the pierced-in kodachi. All in order to spread out the crack and crush the barrier in front of him.

CRACKLE... **CRICKLE**...!

Cracks spread through the barrier. Takeru hit twice, thrice in a row with his knee.

"AAAaAaAAaa——rrRGH!"

CRACKLE!!

Finally the barrier broke and there was nothing separating the demon and Takeru.

The demon bared her teeth and let out a bizarre scream.

Catching the kodachi that had been released into open air, Takeru sharply squinted.

After pulling back her arms, the demon tried to respond to Takeru who was in front of her. She was fast. Seeing how he broke through the barrier, she must have recognized him as a top priority target to kill.

The distance between them was mere five meters. It was too far for him to reach with a sword, he wasn't close enough and he had to get closer.

Two pairs of claws aimed straight for Takeru's neck. Their reach and speed were higher than his. He was unable to catch up to that speed without strengthening.

However, Kusanagi Double-Edged style was swordsmanship for hunting demons.

It was swordsmanship for countering demons who were stronger, better-built and faster.

Takeru coped with the threat like it was natural.

"——Ghost Light Firefly!"

This was the perfect technique for exchanging blows with a monster while not in Witch Hunter form. Even though Takeru's speed could catch up with the demon's speed, his body could not. That's why he predicted the attacks and received them with the minimum necessary movements.

Then by parrying and utilizing the recoil, he increased the power and speed of his own sword. The stronger the opponent was, the faster the opponent was, the stronger and faster he became.

The demon's claws were tremendously fast and powerful.

However——

"So this is about what's a demon worth...!"

She was overwhelmingly inferior to the enemies Takeru has fought so far. Haunted, Kurogane Hayato, Kusanagi Orochi. The difference between her and those monsters was like heaven and earth.

Kusanagi utilized the demons' power in order to surpass them. Takeru inherited that blood and that way of life. Normal monsters had no longer any chance of winning against Kusanagi Takeru. Even with just his own body, he had countermeasures against them.

"Don't underestimate the Kusanagi...!"

While increasing his speed as if engraving a rhythm, Takeru howled.

His speed exceeded the demon's speed, his slashes' power surpassed that of demon's.

Takeru stopped parrying and repelled the demon's claws. Because of the rebound, her arm had been greatly blown away and her bosom was open.

She desperately tried to protect herself. Matching Takeru's attack timing she brought back her both arms and crossed them.

But contrary to the demon's expectations——Takeru's attack didn't follow.

In silence the demon maintained the large-scale magic, unmoving as it defended herself. The moment she released her defense by uncrossing her arms——

"It's over."

——Takeru put the sword in the sheath and lowering his hips he pulled it out all at once.

He reduced the tempo and immediately unleashed a full-body blow. By shifting the timing of the attack he chose the certain opening. Taking to the heart what Orochi had taught him, Takeru used it in practice.

Kusanagi Double-Edged style's Heavenly Demon. The second fastest and certain finisher in the Double-Edged style, right after the secret art.

Thanks to Usagi's bullet piercing through the barrier and hitting the enemy, Takeru understood how strong she was.

There was no need for excessive strength.

——The strike which didn't even let out a sound, has ended in the blink of an eye.

While grasping the pulled out sword, Takeru faced forward with his breathing paused.

The vermilion magic circle expanded beneath the demon had faded away and disappeared without a sound.

While still raising her hands up, the female demon's head has started sliding down and fell to the ground.

Behind him he could tell Ouka and Usagi exhaled.

Takeru too, restarted breathing he had stopped.

——Something touched his cheek.

"——?!"

He immediately raised his head and found what has touched him.

It was——the thing the female demon was trying to activate. Unable to maintain its body, it turned into a melting mass of flesh. The thing which appeared like a freshly-born fetus took Takeru's head in both hands and brought its dead-looking, huge face closer.

A failure of a demon child. The unknown product of magic that the female demon was trying to activate. It showed its last attempt to resurrect itself into this world.

Takeru couldn't move even though he wanted to.

The reason for that was because his touched cheek has already started its erosion. He could hear the voice of his comrades screaming behind him, but the screams faded away. The erosion wasn't affecting his body.

Takeru felt his consciousness leaving his body.

Before he could understand it was what was called "soul", a voice sounded in his head.

Give it back.

Was that the will of the demon whose body and soul were divided and sealed?

What the demon child desired from Takeru, was his soul.

He had no way to resist. Just like Mari's control over her soul was easily taken away by Sougetsu, he too could do nothing. The soul was absolute and at the same time, uncertain.

Takeru's soul was attracted to the demon child. It was because that was how he ought to be. The demon soul was attempting to return to demon body. That was all.

In the deepest darkness, his existence has been attracted. Throwing his narrow body he flowed into a wide space. From a dark space, into a darker space.

The cramped feeling he had sensed ever since he was a child, disappeared.

The demon soul in human body. That inconsistency was being corrected. If at this rate his soul will combine with demon body, Hyakki Yakou will be truly unleashed. The gathered curse would grow exponentially and it would resurrect with power so mighty, it would be incomparable to the time when it was destroyed several thousands years ago.

Dragged by the soul, as his consciousness as a human was about to disappear and turn back into that of a demon.

Someone caught his arm.

A soul had no arm. And yet, he felt it was grasped by a warm hand.

《"I won't give this person to you."》

A nostalgic voice.

《"As long as I'm here, I won't let you make a single scratch on his soul."》

A voice he was used to hearing.

《"Host's soul is already connected to me. It is no longer yours."》

Although there was no feelings in it, power grew in him just by listening to it.

The consciousness he was losing, was returning.

He was pulled back, back to the cramped space.

His own, comfortable body.

《"*Give him back.* This person is my Host. Don't touch him with your filthy hands, monster."》

Yeah... that's right.

Indeed. I won't give it to anyone, I won't let anyone take it.

I'm host yours only, and,

You are a sword, mine alone——Lapis.

——*swishh*...!

At the same time Takeru opened his eyes, he held the handle tied to his hand and thrust it at the piece of meat that was covering him.

The demon let out a filthy scream and squiggled with its tentacles. Apparently while his soul was being pulled in, he was being swallowed by the piece of meat.

His eyes met with the demon child's. He glared back at the demon's red eyes devoid of will, with his own red eyes shining with will.

"As long as we're here, neither Kiseki nor I will let you bastards do as you want... Shut up and get lost...! If not, I'll cut you down...!!"

While piercing the sword deeply Takeru twisted the sword to scratch the wound. A scream roared and the demon child grew fangs in survival instinct, then tried to bite Takeru. It wanted desperately to be released from its seal. Takeru whose entire body aside from his arm was immobilized by the demon flesh had clenched his teeth to endure it.

That's when,

——Takeru, protect yourself!

When he started to lose himself, he heard a voice.

His sharpened consciousness has sensed a presence.

Something was coming directly from above!

《"Host, defense! I'm activating Witch-Hunter form!"》

Ignoring the enemy's characteristic of absorbing magic power, Lapis wrapped Takeru's body with armor. As told to by Lapis with a panicked voice, Takeru pulled out the right arm from inside the demon child and guarded himself upwards.

That moment.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——Mantis Slope!"

A tremendous impact assaulted Takeru's sword.

At the same time, the mass of meat that was covering him was blown away by the shockwave.

Takeru withstood that shockwave and fell on his knees.

Thanks to that, he was released. Takeru raised his head while confirming his body was all right.

And there was,

"...You owe me, Takeru."

There was a girl who muttered that as she confirmed Takeru was safe. He couldn't see her face since it was shadowed, but he opened his mouth and spoke her name.

"Kanaria...——!"

In that moment. The city swallowed by red meat and the giant demon tree have suffered numerous explosions.

"W-what's that...?!"

It looked like flame was spreading.

As tremendous heat and light caused him to squint, a roaring sound passed through the sky. He looked up to see what's going on, and saw three aircrafts pulling a tail of smoke behind them as they moved towards the giant demon tree.

"Fighters..."

While Takeru stood there in shock, Kanaria shook off the meat sticking to Lævateinn and made a sullen expression.

"Reinforcements from Inquisition's branch. Kanata persuaded them to come."

"So, they're allies...?"

"Temporarily. There's much more coming."

As Kanaria said that, a sound of rotors came from behind him.

After the fighters retreated from the big tree while avoiding attacks, about thirty combat helicopters and transport helicopters have approached Takeru and others.

Helicopters wiped out the demon incarnations from the surroundings with hydra rockets. The demon incarnations and stretching waves of tentacles have attacked them, but magic barriers have covered helicopters hindering the attacks. Most likely sorcerers and witches from the Heretic Alliance riding in the helicopters were in charge of defense.

Dragoons were released from transport helicopters and the moment they landed, they started battling with incarnations. Following them, sorcerers and witches got off and started supporting Dragoons.

It weren't just members of the Heretic Alliance. It was the Inquisition cooperating with Heretic Alliance.

It was an unbelievable sight. Witches and Inquisition temporarily cooperating.

Out of one of three helicopters that came down beside Mari and Ikaruga, showing herself from the boarding hatch was the Heretic Alliance's vice-leader, Oonogi Kanata.

The combat staff of the Heretic Alliance followed Kanata and got down while wary, after which the rescue teams ran up to Mari and Ikaruga. Sage and Yuzuho were also together with them.

"We will maintain this location, everyone cooperate and stop Hyakki Yakou's assault! Enemy will push again soon, take off immediately after collecting the rescuees! Hurry!"

Holding the intercom against her ear, Kanata gave orders to her subordinates. Accompanied by the rescue team, she walked beside Takeru.

Her grim expression quickly returned to that of a meddlesome big sister.

"Everyone's all right... is what I cannot say, but I'm glad you're alive."

"Oonogi-san... I-is this all your doing?"

"Yes. Hyakki Yakou's directly targeted Shikoku, Kyūshū and Honshū branches, and except for a few forces they were all completely destroyed. The reinforcement team heading for the capital were moving around in confusion so I called them."

Called them. Did Inquisition really cooperate with heretics just because she called them? Takeru wondered.

"Now that the chain of command has collapsed, it matters not whether we are Inquisition or Heretic Alliance. Everyone wants the same, doing something about this situation."

Certainly, it was as Kanata said. In this situation where it seemed like the world was ending, it mattered not whether they were Inquisitors or witches. Both groups had no choice but to cooperate.

A little relieved, Takeru softened his stiff expression.

"...As expected of an ex-EXE member."

"Currently EXE has the role of supervising Inquisitors, so considering the higher-ups are dead even I have the command."

When she said that while puffing up her chest with a "he-hen",

"——You have no commanding authority. You were expulsed from EXE."

A voice came from behind her back.

Kanata's boastful expression collapsed and she made a displeased one.

"...Well, that's true. In fact, if not for this person's recommendation the Inquisition's remaining forces wouldn't moooove..."

She pointed with her thumb backwards.

A man was slowly walking from behind her in Takeru's direction.

"Kurogane-san...!"

When Takeru spoke to him, Hayato frowned and confirmed the situation surrounding them before looking at Takeru. His expression seemed to relax just a little, but he ended up looking down at Takeru with his usual intimidating expression.

"You're safe. It would be troubling if you weren't."

"Kurogane-san, it's great you are okay..."

"I don't need you to worry about me, don't underestimate me."

As usual there was no courtesy, he was a person who conveyed his emotions very briefly. How he appeared when he charged in to fight with Haunted, seemed to be a dream.

"...What about him...?"

"I fulfilled my promise... Is what I would like to say, but I wasn't the one who killed him."

Hayato glanced towards the helicopter. Takeru followed his sight and saw a boy folding his arms as he leaned with his back on the helicopters boarding gate.

Takeru stared at him... at Kyouya, but Kyouya did not match his gaze. Instead, Kyouya made a gesture as if clenching the stars on his shoulder.

With just that, Takeru understood. Kyouya was able to fulfill his revenge.

Takeru felt like he was saved, just a little bit. It was because he was unable to save Yoshimizu, he felt responsible for Kyouya becoming like this.

With this, Kyouya could finally concentrate on his life. In order not to waste his revenge, Takeru had things to do.

Next, was his turn.

"...Kurogane-san. Sorry for suddenness... but will you listen to my selfish request?"

Raising his knees from the ground, Takeru stood up. Both his arms and legs were trembling furiously, but his body wasn't wasted yet. His soul wouldn't allow it to.

Takeru looked at straight at Hayato.

Hayato also returned a strong gaze.

"Depending on contents. Speak."

"I can't... give you details. Still, please listen to my request."

"No. Speak everything."

Answered immediately, he was refused unless he speaks details.

That's the person Hayato was. Even if Takeru spoke of everything honestly, Hayato wouldn't listen to his request anyway. Hayato would deny Takeru's choice.

However, as Hayato was that kind of a man, Kusanagi Takeru was also stubborn man.

"I'm sorry. I won't. But please listen to me, please."

Lowering his head he forced his wish through. As it was.

Forcing his selfish wish through. That's the kind of man Kusanagi Takeru was. Hayato knew that well, he became aware of it when the two's egos clashed. Even if Hayato continued to ask, Takeru would never ever yield. Hayato once already acknowledged strength of Takeru's ego.

He probably didn't have intention of contending any more. Not wanting to continue with the refusals, he listened to Takeru's request.

"Using the forces we have now, please send me to where Ootori Sougetsu is. If you do, I will take care of the rest."

"…………"

"I will save the world. This is something only I can do."

"………………"

"Leave——the world in my hands."

While aware he was saying something outrageous, Takeru seriously told Hayato his request.

Hayato continued to receive Takeru's gaze, until finally squinting.

"No matter the situation you always prioritize yourself, huh."

"I was told the same by *him* as well. I am aware."

"Don't think awareness is an excuse."

"...He told me this as well."

Takeru scratched his cheek with a bitter smile.

Still squinting, Hayato continued to stare at Takeru. Takeru too, continued to stare back. Were there any hesitation in his will, Hayato wouldn't agree. Even if it was a bluff, even if it was a lie that he didn't hesitate, Takeru didn't allow himself to look away.

He already decided.

"............I have never cursed my powerlessness this much as I am now."

"?"

Takeru tilted his head, as if to ask for the meaning. He thought that "powerlessness" was a word that had nothing to do with Kurogane Hayato, never ever thought he would hear that word come out of his mouth

"To think a child like you would have to carry that burden..."

Hayato turned his back to Takeru.

"It makes me feel like a worthless adult."

That back was ragged and beat-up, but as big and strong as always.

Takeru had no way of knowing what regrets was he carrying. No one was capable of understanding him.

He knew nothing of the strongest man's weakness. No matter how abnormal inhuman power he held, all alone there were things he couldn't do.

Adults knew of their powerlessness. They knew of what was impossible to do. That's why they were able to guide the reckless kids who knew not of their weakness.

Stimulating their weakness, adults convey strength to the next generation.

Kurogane Hayato cursed himself for only being able to do that. Although he considered the way he was called a Hero Vessel a nuisance, in this long battle he finally noticed his true feelings.

He wanted to be a hero.

How he wanted Takeru to pull out, was a proof that he did wish for that.

He wanted to be the one to save the world and display his strength, be the one to lead the next generation. He, an adult, should have become the sacrifice.

It was Kurogane Hayato's ultimate law.

That's why, having to cast these words made him feel pathetic.

"——I leave the world to you, Kusanagi."

Hayato understood that a sacrifice accompanied Takeru's wish. In this instant he has seen through the fact that Takeru intended to save the world at the expanded of himself.

Moreover, Hayato already cast his words.

Takeru grit these words hardly.

It was way too heavy a burden to carry.

However——he wouldn't be Kusanagi Takeru if he didn't accomplish this.

"Roger. I will save it for sure."

Gritting Hayato's wish in his teeth, he received it as an order from a superior.

Still turned with his back to Takeru, Hayato started walking.

"Oonogi, change of plans. Order the Heretic Alliance to prioritize delivering Kusanagi Takeru to his objective. I will gather Inquisitors."

"...Understood."

After hearing everything Kanata said nothing in response. She only accepted Hayato's request. She probably saw through what Takeru intended. She knew well enough that he had strong enough will to make Hayato break.

Hayato gave orders to Inquisition, Kanata – to Heretic Alliance.

All adults in this place moved for their sake.

Strongly reassured by them, Takeru quietly said his thanks.

Thank you very much.

"...Takeru, what were you talking about with Captain Kurogane?"

Ouka who was receiving treatment from support team, had come beside him. Mari, Usagi and Ikaruga were together with her. Takeru immediately changed his thinking and to conceal his destiny, he raised his eyebrows and greet his friends.

"Rejoice, everyone. Inquisition and Heretic Alliance will help us out save Kiseki."

"Yeah... I heard the communications from Captain Kurogane. However."

Pushing past Ouka, Mari and Usagi questioned him.

"What do you intend to do about the Chairman? You aren't planning to kill him, are you? Can we trust him? Kusanagi, you heard something, haven't you?"

"I told you I will support you, Takeru, but what kind of scheme is that? I can't trust that person!"

The support witches behind them were saying "Don't move so much yet〜" in panic, but the two didn't listen. Bending backwards unconsciously he tried to calm the two.

"I-I didn't hear the details either. Kurogane-san and Oonogi-san apparently have a plan, Chairman... in case that bastard gets a hold of someone's soul the plan will be revealed, so they told me not to tell anyone..."

For a lie thought up on spot, he thought it was quite convincing, but——

"Whhhaat is that supposed to meaaan?! You agreed on such unclear plan, Kusanagi?!"

"HAA?! First he gets in our way, then suddenly comes back to help and now he's saying he can't tell us anything?! There's a limit to how fishy it can go!"

——There was no way he could've convinced them. They were only enthusiastic about doing this together, he might have been unlucky with Hayato suddenly appearing as they seemed to be pissed off about him butting in.

What a bunch of egoists, Takeru thought again.

"Nono, we just have to accomplish our goal! What we have to do is to save Kiseki, and we can leave Chairman to the adults, they said..."

""I'm not convinced!""

"O-Ouka, tell those two we can trust Captain Kurogane!"

Pressed on by the two, he sought help from Ouka.

Staring in Takeru's face with a slightly appalled expression, Ouka made a clumsy smile.

"Y-yeah... I mean, we have no plan for dealing with Ootori Sougetsu in the first place. If there's some kind of hope, we best pick it up..."

The reason she barely agreed with him was most likely because she trusted Hayato, but how she didn't look comfortable, was because she wasn't convinced either.

She noticed it was unnatural. Possibly she felt that there were lies within what Takeru said.

Ikaruga too, stared at Takeru as if seeing through what was in his heart.

"Kanaria."

She spoke to Ikaruga, who was standing behind Takeru. Kanaria turned towards Ikaruga with a displeased expression.

"You heard what was he talking about with Kurogane Hayato, right?"

"............"

"What did they talk about? What did Kusanagi say?"

Kanaria glared at Ikaruga as she asked with a serious expression.

Takeru thought the situation was bad. Kanaria heard Takeru say "save the world". If Ikaruga knows that, she will ask him about it.

How? How do you intend to save the world from Ootori Sougetsu's curse?

Kanaria shrugged and responded to Ikaruga's question.

"All he said was about Kiseki. That Hyakki Yakou going berserk isn't her fault. "So leave Kiseki to me, I'll definitely stop her". Stuff like that."

"Anything else?"

"After that Kurogane Hayato questioned Takeru and one-sidedly decided the plan."

"...Really?"

Kanaria furrowed her eyebrows and puffed her cheek as if to say "why would I lie here?". It seemed like her acting was successful as Ikaruga relaxed herself, barely convinced.

Takeru felt relieved inside. He didn't think Kanaria would keep quiet about the contents of his conversation with Hayato. Ikaruga has moved her attention away from him, put her hands on Ouka's shoulder – who was calming down Usagi and Mari, then spoke something to her.

Instructing Lapis, Takeru spoke to Kanaria through magic connection.

《"Thanks for keeping silent."》

Kanaria exchanged glanced with Takeru for a second, and quickly averted her sight.

《"Kana is angry at her. She tried to leave Kana behind again... That's why I didn't tell her truth. Its reveenge."》

It's her and Ikaruga. He didn't know what happened between those two when he was facing Kiseki, but he could roughly imagine from what she said.

However, she wouldn't have kept silent just because she wanted to get back at Ikaruga.

《"Kana has no intention of asking what are you going to do, Takeru."》

《"...That helps a lot."》

《"But... I don't know, but... it's not a good thing. She did the same thing to Kana many times, so Kana knows."》

Although Kanaria didn't know the details, she might have felt what he was trying to do from his conversation with Hayato. She still held a grudge that Ikaruga and Takeru tried to leave her when they were going to raid the First Research Facility from the Heretic Alliance's headquarters. She also knew well the regret and sorrow of being left behind.

Takeru smiled wryly.

《"Then why did you keep quiet? About what I'm intending to do."》

He dared to ask. He wanted to know how Kanaria felt towards Ikaruga now.

《"...Kana thought if I told the truth, she... she would leave Kana behind again."》

《"............"》

《"Kana felt that she would have chased after Takeru..."》

Takeru gasped and closed his lips tightly.

If Ikaruga were to know that Takeru was trying to replace the God, she would have done just as Kanaria said. Rather than stop him, she would ask him to take her with him.

Kanaria didn't want that. Of course, neither did Takeru.

Kanaria lightly pulled on the hem of Takeru's clothes.

《"Takeru... will disappear?"》

《"............"》

《"Will you disappear like Orochi?"》

He understood that Kanaria was looking up to him.

Takeru didn't look at her. He felt like his bluff would collapse if he looked at her face. He felt he would tell them everything. That's why he ruffled her head without looking at her. Even though she hated when he did this, just this once she allowed him to. Kanaria also understood this was a parting.

He had a little sister named Kiseki. Their relationship was hard to call that of siblings, and he didn't know how should he interact with her. He didn't know what did "siblings" actually mean.

Kanaria was his sister disciple. Their relationship was very short, but he had a different bond with her than the one with his comrades. Many times he thought that possibly, the sibling relationship in this world was something like he had with Kanaria.

As the elder disciple, he pat the head of his sister disciple.

《"Get along with Ikaruga."》

It was the best farewell with Kanaria he could think of.

He let go of her head and returned to his comrades.

"............"

Kanaria chased after his back with her sight.

She engraved his back... her elder disciple's back in her mind in these last moments.

——The all-out war begins. The last battle which decided the fate of the world.

* * *

Sougetsu who was sitting on top of the giant tree's branch whistled seeing the number of forces that gathered by Takeru's side.

"So they gathered Inquisition's forces with Kurogane-kun's incitement, huh? I had Kiseki-chan destroy the branches to have the chain of command to collapse, but he's as nasty a man as ever."

Isn't he? Sougetsu asked Kiseki, wanting her to agree with him.

Kiseki only looked up at the sky with eyes devoid of light. Because her soul was shut, currently the existence called "Kusanagi Kiseki" was suspended.

The demons' revival had ended up being a failure. With enough luck, Takeru would have had his soul stolen and could have been made into Sougetsu's tool as a demon, but he ended up overcoming a hardship of that level.

The demon curse's crystallization has been destroyed, but Sougetsu wasn't too bothered by that. To Hyakki Yakou which could continue multiplying as long as there was a single cell left, there was no concept of death.

To kill it completely, there was no choice but to kill the source which was Kiseki. Hyakki Yakou multiplied even now, pushing onto Takeru.

And yet, Takeru will probably reach Sougetsu anyway.

Takeru, who was Sougetsu's method for destruction, has become a way for him to be destroyed.

To Sougetsu, the only enemy out there was Takeru. No matter what alliances they make, no one but him can kill Sougetsu.

That was this world's system.

However, even for Takeru it wasn't easy to kill Sougetsu. Even though twisted, he was the God. Despite losing majority of his power, the remaining power of a god was inside Sougetsu.

Ootori Sougetsu was everywhere in this world, and yet nowhere. As long as he remained in this world, there was no chance of having Takeru's blade reaching his throat.

"I can escape any time. But I should remove the source of anxiety right here. While I might be a failure, I shall kill you as the God... Kusanagi-kun."

Lifting Innocentius he had on his lap, Sougetsu pressed the barrel against his forehead.

Then, a thin blade had appeared out of nowhere, which he held in his hands.

It was a bayonet. Having a dull shine like that of brass, it was a rusty and old blade.

Sougetsu attached the blade the Innocentius. At the same time, the blade had started to erode the pure white Innocentius.

The decorations have grown tattered and peeling off, they rose up to the sky.

"Gungnir... Lævateinn... Mistilteinn... Mjölnir... There are only four Sacred Treasures capable of killing God, and allowing attaining of Godhood."

Holding Innocentius against his forehead, in the middle of the light, Sougetsu opened his eyes a little.

"No one said such a thing."

As the decorations peeled off, he stroked Innocentius' shabby-looking barrel.

"You have done well, Innocentius... until the very end you haven't acquired a soul and remained obedient to me. You remained as part of my power. You have my thanks."

While looking at the Innocentius being swallowed by the bayonet, Sougetsu narrowed his eyes like moons.

It was a rust-covered brass gun, and a sword at the same time. A sinister sword with a trigger, despite not having any sharpness it held an abnormal power.

After Innocentius was swallowed, a completely different weapon has revealed itself.

"Now, let's turn the rudder, *Naglfar*."

It was a fake Sacred Treasure holding the Ancient Property "Godless". While Mistilteinn was Gungnir's replica created by Old Humanity, this one was created by the god of destruction called Loki, who had no right to wield a Sacred Treasure——a Sacred Treasure's imitation.

* * *

《"Defense team here! We can't stop Hyakki Yakou's push any longer, hurry and give us orders!"》

A message came from the witches who had built the protection barrier securing the space Takeru and others were in.

In complete Witch-Hunter form, Takeru looked up at the helicopter waiting outside the barrier.

《"——I'll make way to start with. Kusanagi, are you ready?"》

Opening the helicopter's hatch, Hayato – also in Witch-Hunter form, had shown himself.

Takeru looked in his surroundings. There was Ouka next to him, Sage and Yuzuho in the back, as well as Kanaria. Furthermore, five Dragoons, several sorcerers, all waiting for Takeru's signal.

In the end, Takeru looked at Ouka.

She nodded strongly.

I will protect you. He felt himself hear her say, and his heart pained a little.

Shaking off his pain, Takeru pointed forward. The other side of the barrier was filled with Hyakki Yakou. The distance to the three was about ten kilometers in a straight line. Even if he reaches that, he will have to get to the upper part of the tree where Sougetsu was.

Takeru was no longer alone. There were many people lending him their power.

They had to make this suicide attack plan succeed no matter what.

Because the fate of the world lied on his shoulders——

Leaning forward, he poised the sword low.

And——

"Let's go!"

——The instant Takeru howled, the barrier maintaining the space they were in, had disappeared.

A wave of Hyakki Yakou flowed in, and everything that pushed against them——

《"Run! Don't stop no matter what!"》

At the same time Hayato jumped down the helicopter, he started firing in the direction of Takeru and others' progression. Caligula's bullet carrying mayhem blew away Hyakki Yakou whenever they hit.

A path opened in front of them. However, that path was swallowed by Hyakki Yakou all at once.

Takeru ran at full speed. Following him, his comrades and followers ran at full speed as not to be left behind. Hayato thrust out magic power in the air as he reloaded Caligula and finally landed near Takeru and others.

He once again pointed the reloaded Caligula forward.

Takeru caught up to Hayato and passed by him.

"——Go."

The moment he passed by he felt himself having his back pushed, and accelerated without looking back.

Magic bullets were released from Caligula and erased all obstacles in Takeru's way.

He ran down the created path all at once.

Behind him, he could hear Hayato start to battle.

He didn't turn around, looking only forward.

The giant tree was still far. Support fire from the helicopter fell in the direction of his travel, maintaining the path Hayato made.

However, along with the demon tsunami, incarnations have attacked Takeru from both sides.

He did not stop. What he should do was not fighting, but arriving at the goal.

Clenching his teeth, he entrust everything to others. Dragoons and sorcerers took the attacks instead of him, starting a battle.

Takeru did not stop. He hurried forward.

Tsunami pushed against him, and the path slowly closed.

"From here on, I'll make way."

Sage stopped in tracks and put his hands on the earth At the same time he drew magic circle, small walls of rust emerged on both sides of the narrowing path. The wall made of rust magic maintained the open path.

The wall spread open the way Hayato made, growing endlessly forward.

"Go Kusanagi! Save everything!"

Takeru's back was pushed by Sage's voice. Since the battle at the First Research Facility, Sage helped him many times. Back then, Takeru was not saved. He didn't want to bear any more of such sorrow. He didn't want the salvation he was about to reach, to spill from his hands again.

That's why Takeru didn't stop. He didn't pause in his tracks.

Even if his legs break, even if he has to crawl he will get at that man's throat!

Ahead, the tsunami pushed in from the front between the walls.

Bloodshot demons' eyes stared at Takeru alone, vast numbers of mouths screamed as they approached him.

Passing by Takeru, Yuzuho leaped forward.

"Guards' Spearsmanship technique——Secret Art – Eternal Godspear!"

Maintaining the leap's momentum she thrust using centrifugal force. The thrust clad in magic power has grew huge right before release giving it a reach unthinkable of what the spear was originally capable. Momentarily breaking through the demon tsunami, it opened the path again.

As soon as Yuzuho finished her thrust, she looked up the walls on both sides.

Incarnations were crossing over the wall of rust. Yuzuho leaped again and landed on the wall to commence battle with them.

While exchanging attacks with the demon incarnations using her spear, not looking at him, Yuzuho cast her words towards Takeru.

"Kusanagi-san... may fortunes of war be with you!"

No matter how rough his breathing was, he wasn't allowed to stop. Yuzuho and Sage lend him a hand as part of Heretic Alliance. The united front that began because of coinciding interests, has continued. The two had already saved those they wanted to save, yet still lent him their power like this. He could only have thanks towards the two, who were in similar circumstances as him.

He had no intention of wasting their help.

Takeru finally approached near the goal. As he approached, he understood how enormous it was. Sucking in the planet itself and stretching its trunks it seemed like the mythological World Tree itself.

The branches covering the sky wriggled and making crackling sounds, they descended towards Takeru like arms.

《"We aren't at a distance where we can reach him with booster. Let's get closer!"》

Responding to Lapis' request he further accelerated. Following him were Ouka, Kanaria and three helicopters. However, that's when the wall of rust built by Sage has collapsed.

They either left the effective range, or...

"!!"

——Don't think! Look forward!

"Ouka, take care of above!"

"Roger...!"

Ouka spread her wings and ascended. Branches of the giant demon tree approached cutting the air to crush Takeru. Ouka arrived in mid-way and making 《Earl's Fang》 emerge he shot them down. One branch was pulverized, after which Ouka pulverized another one using a fang on the left arm.

Branches continued to come down continuously. There were countless of them, enough to cover the sky. All of it aimed for Takeru.

Making fangs disappear, Ouka held gun-form Vlad in both hands.

Crossing them in front of her chest, Ouka closed her eyes.

"Vlad...! Let's go!"

"——《Tepes Rain》 !"

At the same time she opened her eyes, magic was activated. Huge stakes poured down from the sky, crimson stakes pierced the ground like a mountain of needles. Stakes which fell over a wide area smashed up branches of the giant tree and demon incarnations.

Maintaining 《Tepes Rain》 Ouka continued to attack the incoming huge branches. Leaving the attacks from above to Ouka, Takeru clenched the sword he had been poising low.

Kanaria too, has pulled out Lævateinn from her back, allowing it to clad itself in flames.

In front there was an incoming wave of Hyakki Yakou and incarnations.

The two of Double-Edged style activated Soumatou at the same time.

"Match me!"

"You match Kana, Takeru!"

Kanaria moved ahead and swung the two-handed Lævateinn.

"Double-Edged style——Single Wheel."

Using the sword's weight the let out a slash from a big rotation. Continuing to rotate like a tornado, she stopped the tsunami. The red flame blowing from the blade massacred the demons. Despite losing majority of its performance, the half-destroyed Sacred Treasure flames' power was more than enough to wipe out demon cells.

Blue hair and red flames danced on the battlefield.

The sword's rotation stopped. Kanaria restrained Lævateinn's momentum with her muscles and stopped sliding on the ground.

Hyakki Yakou started flowing back into the opened space.

Kanaria took a posture using the sword like a shield. That kind of defense hadn't much point against the muddy Hyakki Yakou. The moment the incoming Hyakki Yakou was about to swallow her, an azure shadow leaped to where Kanaria was.

Transforming Lapis into wide-bladed greatsword, using the multiplied super heavy weight, Takeru smashed the muddy stream that tried to swallow Kanaria.

"Double-Edged style——Mantis Slope!"

As if causing an explosion, Takeru's strike crushed Hyakki Yakou along with the earth itself. Kanaria was taking a defensive posture in order to block the aftermath from Takeru's attack.

After Kanaria blocked Mantis Slope's impact, she clenched Lævateinn's handle and started running inside smoke. Takeru also started running the moment he landed.

The two's collaboration had began. Moving forward in alternation they used Double-Edged style's technique without stopping.

Double-Edged style's Heavenly Demon, Mantis Slope, Single Wheel, Yamata no Orochi.

True-Light style's Wolf's Blade, Shark's Blade, Bee's Blade.

Enemies were both shapeless and humanoid, True-Light style was used against humanoid and Double-Edge style was used to strike down the shapeless. The two embodied the original two styles.

As the two alternated, their sword techniques burst out. Having the same master and losing the same master, the two used everything they learned from him.

Abnormal, heretical, power-brutal savage swordsmanship. Despised by martial art schools and made fun of those using guns. It was all the truth. It was indeed barbarous, suicidal and desperate.

However, now——as the two's swords danced in the air, their sparkling appearance which looked like two meteors——could be called beautiful.

Kusanagi's will taught to them by the instructor has been succeeded by the two.

"Takeru, *I'll send you.*"

Kanaria poised her sword low and once again made a big swing with the great sword by using centrifugal force. However, the blade wasn't set up horizontally but with the flat of the sword.

Takeru instantly understood what was Kanaria trying to do and adjusted his timing.

Once rotation, two rotation. Then matching the acceleration rotation, Takeru jumped in the rotation course.

Then with the third rotation Takeru landed on Kanaria's Lævateinn's flat side.

Just like that, Takeru was swung along with Kanaria's sword for entire rotation. Meanwhile, Takeru gathered his strength in his body's springs and twisting his entire body.

"GOOOOOOoOoooo————!!"

Kanaria roared. Releasing the strength in her pivot leg, she swung the sword with everything she had.

At the same time she let out the fourth rotation, Takeru on top of Lævateinn had released all the springs in his body and leaped.

Using Single Wheel's acceleration and power——

"Unicorn's Destructive Lance!"

——Clad in Lævateinn flames Takeru poised Mistilteinn towards the obstacles. His flaming body swept away the muddy flow of demons as he moved forward.

"Soumatou!"

While charging at speed of a bullet, Takeru released a technique.

Just the shockwave was enough to blow away the shapeless waves. He slashed a huge demon diagonally, cut down five more demons with a cleave, then maintaining cleave's momentum he returned the sword to the form of a nodachi and put it inside the sheath to use Heavenly Demon to eliminate a wave of demons.

Once the momentum of Kanaria's throw has decreased, Takeru bent his body forward to the limit and started running again.

It was used by both True-Light and Double-Edge styles unique fighting method, 《Battle Driving》.

More like crushing enemies with the momentum than slashing them, Takeru continued running.

Turning the handle around he changed reverse hold for the sword. After changing Lapis into a straight sword he repeated using Wolf's Blade, Rhino's Blade, Shark's Blade and Bee's Blade. Taking down enemy one by one he moved without decreasing his running speed.

There was no chance of him toppling over as he used Battle Driving. As long as he used Soumatou even falling over was an action that felt way too slow. If his leg breaks and he loses his balance, he would just continue running along while maintaining cold judgment, then after reacting to the impact of falling he would restart running. He was leaning forward so that he didn't by any chance end up falling forward. As long as he collapses forward, he can handle that in multiple ways by using Soumatou.

Enemy came from the sky. Ten of them. Feathered lumps of meat Ouka was unable to shot down opened their mouths inside which they gathered red light. While maintaining flight speed equal to Takeru's speed, they started attacking him.

It was difficult avoid while using Battle Driving. The red flashes hit by his feet several times and whenever they landed, ground turned into Hyakki Yakou.

"Sword in my right, Kusarigama in left!"

《"Understood."》

Lapis responded to his request and changed the sword into one with a small sickle on a chain.

While still running, Takeru rotated the chain with his left hand.

The sickle danced in the air soundly as it cut through the air.

There was no need to aim. People of Kusanagi never managed to hit with distance attacks. Using the chain as an extension of the sword he just swung it around.

A meat block was caught in the swing path of the chain and sickle, exploding like a fruit as a result. Takeru slashed the demon army approaching from the front with the sword in his left hand as he cut down the enemy in the sky with the Kusarigama.

Eventually demon army's momentum had decreased and his red-filled field of vision had cleared up.

Did he arrive? ——No, not yet.

An enormous jaw approached from the front while tearing earth apart with its teeth.

Hyakki Yakou simulated even a dragon, the irregular dragon approached Takeru while crawling on the ground.

But Takeru did not stop.

He continued to move forward.

There was a technique for dealing with dragons in Double-Edged style.

——GOAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!

The huge mouth howled and attempted to swallow Takeru.

Leaning the sword against his shoulder Takeru charged towards the demon dragon.

The moment the dragon's jaw tried to bite Takeru, he kicked off the ground and jumped. Avoiding just before the jaws closed he jumped over the dragon's head and landed on the back.

Rotating forward, fixing his position while rolling he pierced the sword's tip into the dragon's back.

It was soft. A dragon without scales wasn't worth calling the strongest fantastical organism. Takeru ran while having the blade pierced in and had the sword change shape into that of an enormous zweihander.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——Rain Dragon's Charge!"

The sword pierced into the dragon's back had pierced its throat and matching Takeru's charge, it was sliced into two like a cooked fish.

After running down the dragon, Takeru rolled on the ground before getting on this legs.

He had no time think about this or take a proper breath. Rather than spend time on feeling the aftertaste after striking down a big foe, he concentrated on running.

And, when he was about to start running again,

《"Host... from here we can...!"》

"All right!"

Hearing Lapis' voice, Takeru finally stopped his legs.

The giant demon tree was already in front of him. It was so big that it couldn't fit in his field of vision. Red organic trunks had eyes, noses and various other objects growing on them, reminiscent of human body parts.

Arriving at the trunk of the tree by its root and glared at the branch above the clouds.

He could see a white shadow behind the red cloud.

Takeru came here to kill him.

After running all this time without breathing properly, Takeru finally took a deep breath. Although it wasn't so cold, his breath was white. He could see steam coming out of his body. There was no part of his human body which didn't reach the limit of its operation.

However, he could still move. Unable to feel pain, he arrived here without having his mental energy weakening.

Using Soumatou, he focused all his strength into his legs. The muscles in his legs swelled to the point of near-rupture. Bending his knees he took a leaping posture.

"...Lapis!"

《"FM Booster——full throttle!"》

Magic power has gathered on the leg and back parts of Takeru's armor and started blowing out like a jet engine from ejection mechanisms on his heel.

As he leaped, Takeru rapidly rose to the sky. Crushing the air with his mass, Takeru ascended towards where Sougetsu was.

《"The giant tree has responded, return attack!"》

At the same time Lapis warned him, Takeru held the sword in mid-air ascension.

Branches and leaves blocked the path of his travel like tentacles and attacked him. Lapis adjusted the booster avoiding the tentacle attacks.

Not good. There was too many of them. Leaves and branches overlapped against one another like a net, seeming to completely block his path.

There was no choice but to cut them down. Takeru changed the sword's shape and held a two-handed sword.

In order to not let his brain exceed the operation limit he released concentration and tried to activate Soumatou.

That's when——Takeru's brain went out of control against his will.

"————Ngh...?!"

Everything but one goal have been erased from his consciousness.

Not at a time...like...this——!

Regardless of his will 《Demon's Heart》 activated. Because of Soumatou's abuse, the lid he used to close it has opened completely.

No...I can't lose myself...now...

Just like a TV turned off, snap, Takeru's self-consciousness disappeared.

* * *

"——GGAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaAAAAAAAAAAaAA!"

——**slash**!

Despite being just wind pressure, the attack has pulverized the giant tree's branches and leaves into dust.

The slash was completely unrefined and yet because of Demon's Heart, the subsonic speed the strike had smashed everything.

《"Host!"》

Lapis' voice didn't reach him either. Takeru single-mindedly swung the sword slashing all obstacles as he aimed for the top.

"UUURRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!"

Beast-turned Takeru rotated his sword in mid-air as magic power was ejected from his armor and like a lawnmower he cut down the tentacles trying to entangle him. The demon tree continued to attack Takeru without stopping.

In the way. It's in the way. In the way in the way in the way in the way in the way.

Takeru's thoughts narrowed down to a single point, have flowed into Lapis.

Not good. At this rate Takeru's body and brain would break before he confronts Sougetsu.

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoOoOOoOoOOoo!!"

《"Please calm down! Listen to my voice!"》

No matter how much she called, her voice didn't reach him. In state with Demon's Heart activated Takeru couldn't release it just like that. She could guess several reasons for that. The overuse of brain during repeated battles. Side effects of God-Hunter form.

At this rate he would become unable to come back. Lapis had no choice but to interrupt magic power ejection. She focused all her consciousness on retrieving Takeru's consciousness. Bringing her soul closer to his, she awakened his consciousness.

Although they weren't fused, their souls were connected. She was the only one who could bring him back. Even if there was a chance now, it would be all for naught if Takeru lost himself.

Lapis literally put her soul into her words.

《"Get a hold of yourself! You aren't allowed to lose yourself yet!"》

"GUAAaaa...AaAaaa...!"

《"Aren't you going to save everyone,...?! Together with me...!"》

"Uu... uuUuUuu...!"

《"You're supposed to fulfill your selfishness, you can't lose yourself in here!"》

"………………"

《"If you are to swing me, swing me out of your own will!"》

These words made light return to Takeru's eyes.

* * *

——Light has returned to only one of his eyes. Suddenly the scenery appeared in front of him.

What Takeru saw after coming back, was the huge tree filling the sky.

He understood that he was in the middle of free fall.

Roots of the giant tree waited for Takeru to crash down.

His memory disappeared. He couldn't recall where was he or what was he doing. Takeru felt he lost quite a bit of his past memories. Felt like he lost a lot of important things.

Moreover, he couldn't *see anything with his left eye* from a moment earlier. It was pitch black.

Abuse of Demon's Heart was the cause. Soumatou and Demon's Heart… while it was true that he wouldn't survive unless he used it, he was told to avoid abusing it, but…

"……?"

Inside the slow-motion world Takeru saw tears falling from his eyes and ascending to the sky. He immediately realized why was he crying.

——Because he forgot.

——He forgot who has taught him this technique.

He knew the name and effect of the technique, but he didn't know where has he learned it or who told him its name. He no longer knew. Takeru lost memory of a person important to him. Despite understanding that, he didn't remember who was it. Like a puzzle piece removed from the whole, there was a hole, an important memory was missing.

Did lose a bodily function and forget important memories upon using it?

He wasn't underestimating it, he was prepared for it. However, once it has become a reality he felt something squeeze his heart. I hate this, his soul cried. I have so many memories I don't want to lose. Tears flowed without stopping, strength left his body. At this rate he would leave everything and let the urge to escape take over.

Suddenly, warmth had wrapped his back.

《"...I'm here. I will become your eyes, become your legs, and become your memory."》

"————"

《"Even if you forget everything, even if you become God, even if you become an existence no one can reach."》

"————————"

《"I will... be by your side."》

Takeru's tears mixed together with tears Lapis' illusion embracing him had shed and ascended to the sky.

Lapis touched Takeru's cheek.

《"That's why please, hold me in your hand once again...!"》

Strength returned to his hand. The trembling of his body which continued, had ceased. Power has returned to his soul.

Ahead of where his tears ascended, he saw a tiny white shadow.

That's right. Remember. You haven't lost everything yet. You remember your comrades and did not forget about your little sister.

Takeru felt furious at himself. He raged knowing that there was no time to rest.

Remember!

Who was it that made us, made the world this way!

Why are you here!

Your reason to fight!

——You're here to smash that bastard's head in, dammit!

"Lapiss!!"

Magic power started ejecting again. The moment the falling momentum had stopped, he kicked off the giant tree's root and leaped.

Ahead of where he ascended awaited hand-shaped branches and leaves. Takeru prepared his sword to break through the net blocking his path.

"Takeru——!!"

The branches and leaves that were about to attack Takeru were pierced by stakes.

Ouka caught up to Takeru with her ragged-out wings. She must have received quite the damage before she could reach him. It was thanks to Ouka that he could run without being attacked from the sky.

Both of them were full of wounds. Ouka used up a considerable amount of magic power during repeated battles, Lapis too had few magic power remaining. It was because half of Lapis' magic power capacity she had was filled with Gungnir's magic power. But they couldn't afford to use Gungnir's "God's Authority".

Ouka flapped her wings and moved next to Takeru, raising the same way as him. They nodded to each other and attacked the tree's branches. Raising up while making a spiral, they thrust forward the fang and sword.

The red and azure meteors rose towards the sky without stopping.

Nothing could stop them. The fang and sword crossed as they aimed for the top.

《"Takeru... What are you trying to do...?"》

While they fought, he heard Ouka's voice in his head as she flew beside him.

Takeru didn't respond and only looked upwards.

《"Suginami told me... I also felt it... are you trying to carry something we cannot bear...?"》

Takeru didn't respond. Gritting his teeth, he only looked upwards.

He could easily imagine what kind of expression Ouka was making now.

Without a doubt, filled with anxiety and somewhat reminiscent of one a lost child makes.

《"Takeru...? Why won't you say anything...? Is it something you can't tell me?"》

Takeru accelerated as if to leave Ouka behind, moving ahead.

His gums started bleeding and the taste of iron filled his mouth. Look above. Don't hesitate. Don't mind. If you look in Ouka's face now, you will stop running forward like you have been.

Although it was a cruel thing, it had to be done.

《"Tell me you aren't going anywhere... please... make me feel at ease."》

"——!!"

《"Be by my side... foreve——"》

Ouka stopped flapping her wings. Takeru felt that happening behind him. Vlad's magic power had ran out and it was impossible for her to maintain flight.

Don't turn around. Ouka will be all right. Enemy is aiming for him. Prioritize your objective now——

——He couldn't.

Takeru paused magic power ejection and caught Ouka's hand as she was about to fall.

"...Takeru..."

Ouka looked just as he imagined her, she looked at Takeru with tears in her eyes.

There was no mistake that he was making a similar expression. Holding Ouka's hand Takeru started ejecting magic power again. Because he was pulling Ouka with him, the speed of his ascension decreased while magic power consumption increased.

However, he didn't let go of her hand.

Takeru didn't say anything. Being unable to say anything was his weakness. Feeling pain from this situation where he wanted to accept Ouka's feelings but being unable to, feeling sorrow caused by his own will he aimed for the top.

He also wanted to be together with her. If possible, he didn't want to go. He wanted to properly fulfill their promise. His clenching of her hand strongly was the only response to Ouka's feelings. Putting in the desire of wanting to continue walking by her side and the thought of having to go, he held her hand.

His feelings were relayed to Ouka. She knew just how much feelings he put in his hand. That's why she held Takeru's hand in return.

Strongly, very strongly.

They approached the goal. Just a few dozens of meters more. If only he reaches his hand out, he'll arrive.

But that's when the magic power jet pushing them upwards had ceased to work.

《"No way, just a little further...!"》

Lapis' puzzled voice echoed. She was out of magic power. Their rising speed decreased, Takeru and Ouka stopped in mid-air.

Feeling afloat in despair, Takeru extended his hand towards the top.

Like always, he sought slight hope.

He stretched his fingertips as much as possible, wishing.

——*Reach...!!*

Contrary to his feelings, he started falling. Gravity stuck to him, dragging him down.

But, not yet!

I'll reach it even if I have to burn my body down!

He tried to instruct Lapis to turn Witch-Hunter form's armor parts into magic power for ejection, but then——

《"Take it——my magic power!!"》

A strong voice sounded in his head.

Takeru looked downwards in surprise.

A helicopter was rising from below where the two were.

He could see a striped cloth swaying in the boarding hatch.

Her muffler fluttering, Mari accumulated aurora-colored magic power in her fingertips, returning hope to Takeru once again.

"Lapis! 《Twilight Enchantment》!"

Takeru yelled and Lapis used the armor's magic power for using intrinsic magic. Even by releasing the Witch-Hunter form, he could use 《Twilight Enchantment》 only for an instant.

An instant was enough. He has experienced this exchange twice already.

Their cooperation's timing matched no matter the situation.

《" "Aurora Canon"!"》

A rainbow shell approached Takeru. At the same time, Lapis activated 《Twilight Enchantment》. Holding Lapis' blade in his right hand, Takeru slashed the shell.

For just an instant the blade was covered in azure flames and the rainbow-colored shell was sucked into the blade.

After recharging magic power, Lapis quickly re-activated Witch-Hunter form.

While ascending again, Takeru looked just once towards Mari in the helicopter.

Mari closed her eyes, held down her hat and shouted towards Takeru.

"Takeru!"

Not through magical communication, but with her own voice. Even despite the rotor sound's exposure and the wind, her voice firmly reached Takeru.

Takeru opened his eyes wide, he saw her appearance, heard her voice clearly.

"No matter what are you trying to do, I will push your back! No matter what result awaits, I'm with you!"

"————"

"That's why, go on! Finish this...!"

She put her hands on her chest and distorting her face painfully, heartrendingly, she exposed all her feelings to Takeru.

They were simplest and most straightforward feelings possible. There was no way Mari hasn't noticed how Takeru looked like. She must have realized first and foremost that he was thinking of doing something outrageous. She was more delicate and strong than anyone in the platoon, seen through others best, and thought of Takeru more straightforwardly than others.

Mari shed tears, staggering she fell on her knees on the boarding gate. Running out of magic power again, her body was at its limits.

Her face reddened, she spun words while desperately trying to maintain consciousness.

The propeller drowned out sounds with the wind and he could not hear her voice.

——I like you... I love you.

However, Takeru didn't miss her lips' movement.

It was an endlessly straightforward, Mari's confession.

As she lost her consciousness and had her body supported by Heretic Alliance's comrades, Takeru clenched his teeth.

In order to reach her, he filled his lungs with air completely, and shouted.

"——ME TOO!!!! OF COURSE I DO TOO!!!!!"

Then he looked upwards. His hair was ruffled with will to fight and his body was agitated. Having received the magic power and will power to fight, Takeru rose rapidly along with a roar.

Stretching his hand towards the branch Sougetsu was waiting for him on, he ascended to the sky together with Ouka.

And finally——finally——he reached.

Takeru jumped onto the branch energetically and found Sougetsu in his sights.

Sougetsu grinned in silence as he raised one hand to greet Takeru.

"——Hello, you're finally here, Kusanagi-kun."

He was standing there, making the usual smile that made it seem like he has seen through everything. Calm and composed, as if convinced Takeru would have reached this place.

As if they were about to hold a tea party now.

"Well, how about calming down and having a chat?"

Naturally, shamelessly, he tried to start a conversation.

However, Takeru's intention of talking with Sougetsu——

——was none!!

Takeru let go of Ouka's hand and ejecting magic power he landed on the branch. Then maintaining his momentum he jumped straight at Sougetsu.

He didn't miss this one-in-thousand chance, intending to kill him even if a second earlier.

To reap God's life.

Stepping in, timing, an opening, everything was perfect.

Takeru didn't have to instruct Lapis, she activated "God-Hunting form" by herself.

Armor covered his face, flames dwelled in his blade.

There was no need for unnecessary moves. Just quickly cut down.

He didn't mind if his body and brain break. It was all for this moment.

His self disappeared as he sought speed for just one goal.

He only thought of killing the God.

Kusanagi Double-Edged style's Secret Art, Kusanagi Sword. He didn't use the other secret art because it would also reach his comrades.

Killing Sougetsu with this technique has become his existence's goal.

The world has slowed down. Ceased moving.

When leaving everything behind he tried to pierce Sougetsu's heart, in that moment.

Suddenly——Kiseki appeared in front of him. She didn't move, she appeared as if she had been there right from the start.

In thrusting stance, Takeru was astonished and immediately stopped moving.

On the verge of piercing Kiseki's heart he put on brakes with his entire existence.

When the blade touched her chest, his movement stopped completely.

Kiseki's black hair danced in the air... and behind her,

Sougetsu's violet-colored hair drew an arc.

"You don't want to? Then——die."

He pulled out a rust-covered sword and using Kiseki as a shield he slashed with the sword.

As if completely seeing through Takeru, Sougetsu used the worst methods.

Currently, Kiseki had her control over Hyakki Yakou taken away. If Sougetsu was in control of her soul, *Kiseki would end up actually being killed*. Hyakki Yakou won't revive her unless her soul rejects death.

It was the worst situation.

Confident of his victory, Sougetsu swung the sword with a smile.

——Takeru continued to glare straight at him.

There was no resignation or thoughts of defeat in Takeru. He was able to make a shadow appear on Sougetsu's face. Takeru's lack of hesitation or lack of agitation might have been the reason for that.

Of course he didn't understand. This man had no one he could call a comrade, thus he didn't know what it meant to believe.

But Takeru believed.

——He believed that she would stop it.

He already felt her approaching.

Just as Sougetsu thrust his blade, that moment——

——**vwooon**...!

The propeller's rotation blew wind onto the branch as a huge bird of iron appeared beside Takeru and Sougetsu.

Sougetsu opened his eyes, looking at the sudden visitors.

On one knee in the helicopter's hatch, with both eyes open as she looked through the scope——Usagi's figure.

It was an irregularity for a God who ought to see everything. Not seeing Usagi as a threat has backfired on him. It wasn't a king-slaying Einherjar or a seasoned warrior who has snuck in, but an existence he considered a worm that wouldn't dare baring its fangs at the God.

A miraculous bullet was released along with a cloud of smoke.

First one, angrily towards the irregular sword Sougetsu was holding.

The blade was repelled and because of impact, left Sougetsu's hand.

"——What...?!!"

This was the first time Sougetsu's face had distorted. Putting her will into the next bullet which was the last one, Usagi reloaded. Putting everything into every move, she reloaded faster than ever and pulled the bolt.

Then the second shot——was accompanied by tears.

"Kusanagi, I believe in you."

Usagi needed no needless words. She was unable to express her feelings well with them.

She always put everything into this one bullet.

That's why in the end——she entrusted everything to it. Her wish for him not to lose. The wish for him to be by her side. And the wish not to lose him.

And her feeling of love. Everything.

The released bullet went straight for the forehead. The sound of neck breaking, a high pitched sound echoing in the skull. Sougetsu's body bent backwards and he took a step back.

Takeru accepted Usagi's feelings.

The unmoving world started moving again. The world slowed down again. His leg was still in the middle of stepping-in and he did not stop progressing.

Avoiding Kiseki's body he thrust beneath her armpits.

At staggering Sougetsu's heart.

To pierce with the god-slaying power!

——**slash*...*

"..................................Ga...ha...!"

He spat blood with his eyes wide open. Red liquid flowing from his chest mixed in together with the red of the tree branch beneath.

Clenching his teeth, he looked up to the sky.

The blade that was supposed to pierce the God's heart, had cut the empty air without spilling a single drop of blood.

What was pierced instead, was Takeru's chest on the right side. Catching the rusty blade protruding from his chest, Takeru glared at the culprit who stood behind him.

At Ootori Sougetsu, who pierced him from behind.

"What you call a God, was originally not supposed to be perceivable by humans... I have that quality remaining in me. As long as I'm in this world, I am everywhere yet nowhere."

"...Agh...ghh...hh...!"

"Still, as expected of you, Kusanagi-kun. I didn't think you would unconsciously avert your body the moment I moved my existence behind you and avoided having a vital point struck. I am disappointed in my own lack of talent in swordsmanship."

"...gaha...!"

"What a shame. It was quite impressive. The struggle of you all was so impressive my tears wouldn't stop."

"...Bastard...!"

"But it's about to finish this. I'm a bit tired of playing with you."

Sougetsu pushed his blade further in. The moment the blade touched Takeru's body God-Hunter form was forcibly cancelled.

Erasing all magic. The moment magic, gods' factor touched this bayonet, it completely disappeared. Even the power to kill God was not an exception.

This was the characteristic of the Sacred Treasure "Naglfar" that Sougetsu held.

Sougetsu moved his lips to Takeru's ear and whispered.

"Ohh, right, I forgot to mention this. I decided not to be killed by you. If you are you become the God, I no longer have any need for you."

Why does he know? Takeru felt Lapis agitation inside him.

Sougetsu smiled more evily, joyfully, like a cat, then ever.

"Why do I know? ——I know because I'm this world's God."

It was a sarcastic, even masochistic smile filled with insanity.

No one in that location had moved. It could be said that they lost the will to fight. Their confidence in victory was betrayed, suddenly replaced by defeat.

It was a type of destruction. Sougetsu was delighted, he was delighted seeing destruction of those standing on his way.

"Rejoice, Kusanagi-kun. This world will continue y'know? You might die, but it's fine since your wish is fulfilled, right? Weell, rather than becoming a God and living forever, this might be a better end for you as a person."

"............ghh...!"

"One day I will destroy it, but that will surely take several hundreds, thousands of years. Your comrades will be long dead. It will happen in an era that has nothing to do with you so you have nothing to worry about."

".................."

"That's why I wanted to talk. You refused to make peace with me out of your own will. If you only listened to what I have to say, you would have saved people precious to you without becoming a God... what a waste, really."

Takeru's hand holding the blade fell powerlessly. Lapis was desperately trying to heal him, but the healing effect on Takeru's body was being cancelled by Naglfar.

Unable to hold Lapis any longer, he let her out of his fingertips.

Lapis' voice had grown distant.

He couldn't win. He couldn't draw.

That fact has pierced his chest.

"Sorr...y...every...one..."

He could only apologize to his comrades. Unable to fulfill his selfishness, he bit the dust here.

All he had left was regret. Please forgive me. Forgive me not saving the world despite all this selfishness.

He begged for them to forgive everything.

"Noope, no forgiveness for you. I shall judge you myself. You have rebelled against God, y'know."

"..............."

"Yes. Along with those words I made I shall send you off. Now——farewell, Kusanagi-kun."

Sougetsu grasped the handle and tried to twist the blade.

Dazed Ouka returned to herself and tried to rush in while screaming. Usagi hyperventilated and while screaming Takeru's name, she tried to squeeze the trigger.

But they didn't make in time. Even if they did, there was no stopping God.

Confident of his victory, Sougetsu chanted the words of judgment towards Takeru.

Desiring with supreme ardor——that is.

"Licking your lips in front of your prey～? I guess that makes you a textbook villain～."

——What interrupted Sougetsu's words was a relaxed voice, completely unsuitable for this place.

Someone pulled the clothes of Sougetsu, who tried to twist the blade.

In that moment——for the first time ever since being born, Sougetsu felt what they called fear. It was an existence that wasn't supposed to be there. He opened his eyes wide seeing the small hand pulling his clothes.

Blazing red hair. Small body. A smile free of all care.

Impossible. She was supposed to have lost her life to slow him down, why——

"Yahoo～♪"

——Why was Hoshijiro Nagaru here...?!

Furious, regretful, Sougetsu spoke the answer.

"So there was one more fragment of mythological world...!"

"What a fast answer. Indeedly～♪, what a shame～ Sougetsu-kun. Completely fooled ya～."

Sougetsu's judgment was quick. Taking escape as top priority he pulled out the sword out of Takeru and tried to move his existence elsewhere.

——But he couldn't. Nagaru held his hand.

"Even Gods can't erase his existence and impossible to perceive when they are touched like this."

"——!"

"Isn't that "why does she know" written on your face? Well, I'm somewhat similar so of course I knooow～."

Nagaru laughed happily and a magic circle appeared beneath her feet.

Having the blade pulled out, Takeru fell on his knees and looked at the magic circle as he spit blood.

It was transfer magic. Nagaru was trying to move them somewhere else, along with Sougetsu.

Where to?

Obviously.

——To the fragment of mythological world.

If it's in that world, Sougetsu won't be able to move freely. Sougetsu also noticed that, and made an expression saying "she got me". He tried to erase the transfer magic in hurry by using Naglfar, but the hand holding the sword was grasped by Nagaru and wouldn't move one bit.

Contrary to her appearance, her strength overwhelmingly exceeded Sougetsu's.

Unable to shake her off, Sougetsu grit his teeth in frustration.

Nagaru stared at his face without any expression.

"Don't run, God."

I will put my entire existence on the line not to allow you to escape, was the will dwelling in Nagaru's pupils. As he faced that will, a drop of sweat flowed down Sougetsu's forehead. He laughed as he wiped his forehead with a hand.

"Haha-hahahahaha, you really are something...! You got me completely."

"It's my win, Sougetsu-kun. In that world you can go on and settle this man to man with Kusanagi-kun."

Nagaru erased her smile and stared at Sougetsu seriously.

No, she glared at him. Although she was supposed not to hold negative emotions, she glared at Sougetsu.

"But prepare yourself. I assure you, he's strong...! You deeeefinitely won't win!"

Hearing Nagaru's declaration of victory Sougetsu made a wry smile, then shrugged.

And made the usual, familiar smile.

"I wonder... we won't know unless we try. It's not my thing, but I will struggle until the very end. For the sake of destruction."

Ignoring Sougetsu's smile, Nagaru looked at Takeru's back.

The hole in his back was closed by Lapis' healing. It wasn't healed completely. She just blocked the wound and stopped his bleeding.

But it was enough. Even if he hadn't much longer to live, this was enough.

Takeru slowly stretched his bent knees and stood up.

Nagaru spoke to his back.

"Are you ready? ——Let's go, Kusanagi-kun."

Takeru clenched his sword,

"...Yeah, ready any time."

Turning around with his ragged body, he nodded with a manly expression.

The magic circle started shining more strongly, Takeru's, Nagaru's and Sougetsu's bodies started shining.

"Takeru...!"

Ouka ran towards them. When Takeru looked towards Nagaru, she made a bitter smile and pulled out an instant charm to activate magic.

As Ouka stretched her hand towards Takeru, a thin light blue barrier stood in her way.

She hit the barrier with her fist multiple times, realizing it was pointless, she stared at Takeru.

He slowly turned around to look at her, as she stared at him ready to collapse any time.

Approaching the barrier, he just quietly stared back at her.

"Takeru... Takeru...?"

With tears flowing, at a complete loss, she stared at him with heartrending expression.

"What... should I do...? I still haven't repaid you anything... I haven't shouldered anything..."

"............"

"Tell me... how should I live from now on...? Without you by my side..."

She lost her family, lost Vlad, and again she was about to lose.

Ouka appealed to Takeru, to say that she can no longer bear this sadness. Despite knowing he won't accept it, she clung to Takeru. She revealed what was inside her chest to the one she loved.

Her tears were overflowing without stop. She threw away her shame and appearances, single-mindedly putting her right hand on the barrier to touch Takeru. With her left hand grasping her chest as if to grasp her heart, Ouka——

"Where do I direct those feelings inside my chest...?"

"............"

"Tell me... Takeru."

Seeing Ouka's crying appearance, Takeru closed his narrowed eyes.

Then slowly, he overlapped his hand over Ouka's.

Over the temperature-less barrier the two adjusted their hands as if to tangle their fingers together.

"...Live on, Ouka. I'm no longer the only one to walk by your side."

"..........."

"You are not alone. Everyone's with you. Even if I'm not there, you will live on."

It was Takeru's earnest wish. However, to Ouka it was nearly equal to a refusal.

It was a refusal. A refusal towards Ouka's wish of wanting to be together.

Takeru knew that, it was because he knew that he said it.

Ouka slowly collapsed, her hand overlapping his slid on the barrier and fell down.

"But."

Hearing Takeru's trembling voice, Ouka raised her head.

Just like Ouka did, Takeru put his fist on his chest and declared while shedding tears.

"I will take those feelings of yours together with me...!"

He didn't mind if she told him he was selfish. Even if he was told it was a convenient answer, he would just agree. If he was told he's a horrible man, he would just confirm that with all he had.

Takeru loved Ouka.

No matter what he was to be told by anyone, he would not give up these feelings. He will save everything and anything. Acquire everything and all he wants. That's who Kusanagi Takeru was.

No matter what was his destination, he would bring these feelings with him. Ouka narrowed her eyes, as if a little relieved.

"Kusanagi——!!"

A voice from outside barrier reached him.

Takeru turned his face in voice's direction.

He could see Ikaruga bending out of the helicopter's hatch and reaching out.

As if to shake off Ikaruga's feelings trying to stop him, Takeru faced downwards.

Her body, ready to jump out any time had been firmly pressed down by Usagi. Ikaruga's expression as she desperately tried to get down to Takeru, was more heartbroken than he had ever seen.

Usagi too, was shedding tears as she stopped Ikaruga.

Usagi has already resolved herself. That's why she stopped Ikaruga, who hadn't.

Takeru stretched his left hand to Ikaruga.

And clenched his fist, as if to grasp her feelings.

Holding down her hair swaying on the wind, making a tearful expression, Ikaruga made bitter smile.

"...No... I won't acknowledge this..."

Even though her voice didn't reach him, Takeru knew what she said.

He thought that answer was very much like her.

Takeru raised his head and smiled towards the two on the helicopter.

And——

"Everyone... be well."

——He thought himself to be pathetic for only being able to leave them such ordinary words. Even though it was the end, he looked miserable, his face was crumpled with tears and uncool. Thinking it was just like him, he entrusted his body to transfer magic.

His shining body started turning into particles and apart.

At the same time, the barrier maintained by instant charm has lost its effect and shattered.

Fragments of barrier sparkled like stardust, and when Takeru's body was about to disappear.

Ouka leaned her body forward.

Hugging Takeru who was on the verge of disappearing, she turned her arms behind his neck.

Taken by surprise, Takeru tried to support Ouka's body.

As they hugged each other, their faces approached each other and——

——Ouka's lips faintly touched Takeru's lips.

"...Takeru..."

His body turned into particles and disappeared from this world.

Ouka passed through the air where Takeru's body was, then took one, two steps on the branch.

"..............."

Immediately after Sougetsu disappeared, his grasp on the soul was released and Kiseki in the back had soundly collapsed.

The giant demon tree screamed and started turning into stone from its roots. Not stopping at becoming stone, cracks appeared on the tree and it turned into ash.

On top of the crumbling tree's branch, Ouka clenched her fist.

Then towards the sky she shouted his name, who has disappeared from this world.

When he opened his eyes, Takeru was standing in an unknown world.

He felt the atmosphere was similar to a world he had been in before.

Heretic Alliance's headquarters on the fragment of Norse mythology's world... the world that seemed to stop the moment it has been destroyed, fantastical and beautiful.

This world was also the same. A cracked sky. An azure field of flax spreading beyond the horizon. Petals blown away by the impact of worlds' collision stopped in mid-air, improving his fantastical scenery.

And the cracked sky——was in twilight.

The light of sun covered the darkness, mixing with the blue sky.

Covered by the color of the end, Takeru stood at the end of the world.

While looking at the horizon, he slowly overlooked his surroundings and found a man with long white hair swaying in the wind.

Ootori Sougetsu. A god of destruction's remnant who had the role of a God forced upon him.

The God looked at this world while squinting and snorted.

"...What a nostalgic scenery. I'm honestly surprised a place like this still remained."

Rather than nostalgic, he was more like a veteran soldier returning to old battlefield.

A half-god, living god created artificially by the Old Humanity. The only one remaining who knew the details about his birth was him alone. Current humanity couldn't even imagine just how much power old worlds' humanity and gods had. After the countless massacres and endless solitude, he was the only one remaining.

What was it that his nostalgic eyes held? Was it sadness? Or maybe joy?

——Personally, Kusanagi Takeru couldn't care less.

Origins of the world. God's origins. Good and evil. Whatever.

He didn't care. Kusanagi Takeru was here to save. Kusanagi Takeru was here to kill. He was here to accomplish killing the God.

"Hmm. Well, it's a good place to die... right? You two."

Looking for consent, Sougetsu looked at the two.

Takeru stared at him without expression, the red-haired girl Hoshijiro Nagaru turned in opposite direction from Takeru turned her back to Sougetsu. Even though they lined up together, they faced in opposite directions.

"Kusanagi-kun. He still doesn't know *this world's coordinates*. That's why he can't escape from here so easily. It's not as wide as it looks to be, so it's perfect for fighting with a sword. It's a good place to kill him."

Takeru and Nagaru stood in the flower flower field without looking at each other.

"President... did you know it would turn out like this from the start?"

When Takeru asked, Nagaru smiled a little and looked towards the sky.

"Not from the start. I didn't have any confirmation that Sougetsu-kun is the God and the two from Valhalla didn't tell me."

"...You've done too well for that to be true."

"I could only bet. Bet that Orochi-kun and Mother Goose will lose and entrust something to you."

"............"

Orochi and Mother Goose. Even though they disappeared from their memory, his chest throbbed hearing their names. They were probably the people who taught him the method to kill the God and become a God.

"But it wasn't a poor bet. I knew how those two think, I knew they were that kind of people, too. I guess what I was most uneasy about was whether you will win against them or not."

"...Haha, even if you ask me, I don't know."

"I guess. I kept lots of things secret from you, deceived you a lot, too. Sorry."

Nagaru apologized, but Takeru just shook his head.

"In that case... thank you for deceiving me."

"…………"

"I know that this situation was created thanks to you, President. I understand that there was a lot I shouldn't have known. That's why, thank you very much."

Hearing Takeru's words of gratitude, Nagaru shook her hair and relaxed her shoulders a little.

"...I'm sorry, Kusanagi-kun. I can't take your place. The truth is, that I should have taken your role. I was born in order to do what you are about to do. It's not like I was told that by someone, but that's what I feel."

Nagaru, who was not supposed to hold negative emotions, spoke words of chagrin despite her bright tone of voice.

Previously, she said that she didn't hold emotions such as regret or sadness but knew how disappointment feels. Nagaru surely must have felt disappointed that Takeru must accomplish this role.

Takeru leaned the sword on his shoulder and responded seriously.

"That's wrong. Right from the start, it was something only I could do. I won't give this role to anyone. It's mine alone."

"…………"

"President, there's a lot of cleaning up left in our world. You are necessary in that world. Rebuilding everything is your job, right?"

He could tell Nagaru turned around behind his back.

Takeru didn't turn around. Looking at his enemy, he only exchanged words with her.

"You're really strong〜. If possible, I wanted you to be happy, too."

"...I'm not unhappy, at the very least."

"And yet, I wanted to see a complete happy end. But——"

Even though his sensation was dead, he could tell Nagaru's hand touched his back.

Her forehead bumped onto his back.

"——I won't let the hope you gave us, go to waste."

She moved her hand away then took one step, then another, moving away.

Takeru moved the sword away from his shoulder and held it in both hands.

"I leave my comrades to you."

"Yup. I leave the world in your hands."

Saying so, Nagaru activated transfer magic again. The magic circle let out like waves and Nagaru's body started disappearing.

"...Bye bye, Kusanagi-kun. Thank you."

"Farewell, Student Council President Hoshijiro."

After saying their goodbyes, the two turned their backs to each other in order to progress on their paths.

The presence behind him faded and the remnants of the particles danced in the sky, disappearing far in the twilight.

Silence has spread. In the center of unmoving world, Takeru thought of his own world. About the days where he laughed together with his comrades. Memories he remembered, memories he lost, held tightly in his chest——Takeru poised his sword.

"Finished talking? Fighting like this isn't my style, but... let's begin."

Sougetsu too, had a sword appear in his hand. It was a brass-like rusty blade holding a dull shine. The shape looked like it was between sword and a gun. It was a single-edged blade with a handle and a large trigger. It was probably a Sacred Treasure, or its imitation. What Takeru understood, was that this sword could forcibly release God-Hunter form.

Any other details were unknown.

"...Any words to leave behind?"

When Takeru asked, Sougetsu burst into laughter.

"What's that, mercy towards a prisoner on a death row? Now? How silly."

Certainly, it was silly. It wasn't something to ask the person he was about to kill.

Takeru just wanted to confirm. When he was stabbed in the heart, Sougetsu said the world "peace". Takeru wanted to know whether he was serious or not.

So if he dares to say the word "peace" again, he would cut his head off in that instant.

What are you talking about after all this, don't screw around.

Sougetsu stroked the sword, its blunt shine reflected itself in his eyes.

"I have nothing to leave behind. That's how I lived my life."

It wasn't acting gallant nor bluffing because he gave up, it was Ootori Sougetsu's truth.

He was saying he had no regrets. He did his best as the god of destruction, doing as he pleases with all he had, he enjoyed himself to the fullest. Even if he is defeated, he would lose his life proudly. That was his pride as god of destruction——no, as Ootori Sougetsu.

He was nasty right from the start. Despite everything, Takeru has been at this man's mercy for a long time, used as a pawn he was forced to suffer. That's why he could understand him to a certain extent.

That's the kind of man he was. He knew Takeru's hatred, anger, but still acted like it had nothing to do with him. As if to show off how important he was, he looked at everything from above.

——As if I'd acknowledge it. A god or the top or whatever, I'm at limits of my patience.

——I've got to teach you bastard a lesson, and not just one but lots of them.

——Furious, full of resentment and looking uncool, I'll rattle on however I like.

Takeru formed a fist with his trembling hand, putting in his entire body and soul worth of anger.

For now, just smash everything at him.

Kusanagi Takeru's threw all his feelings at Sougetsu.

"I'll have you *shoulder everything.*"

"…………"

"My comrades' chagrin, sorrow... Kiseki's suffering, sins, countless deaths...! Lament of all those you have been playing with! Regrets of those who died! My endless anger and hatred...!"

"...Ha."

"——I'll drop you down to hell with all that on your back, Ootori Sougetsu!"

Twilight flame flowed from the blade and started burning the flax field in a flash.

Clad in armor of god-hunter, clad in god-slaying flame.

He put his sword in the sheath and slid the sheath low.

"AntiMagic Academy 35th Test Platoon's captain, Kusanagi Takeru——I will... kill you!"

"I have no name to tell you. Let's quickly finish this, worm."

Sougetsu spoke while shrugging like usual, as if making fun of him.

Ruffling his hair, Takeru released his brain to the limit.

He had no intention of prolonging the battle. If in addition to God-Hunter form he activated Demon's Heart, Takeru would no longer remain himself. There was no need to worry since ultimately, that would happen anyway. There was no need to think about what happens once he kills God and becomes God.

But when he kills this man——kills this shitty bastard, he has to be himself otherwise he won't be satisfied.

That's why he will end this as fast as possible.

He will finish him with one blow. Using Double-Edge style's fastest, so fast a blow that even a God would not be able to see it to finish it all. Just as Sougetsu himself said, he wasn't good at fighting. Takeru understood that from how he held the sword. There was no doubt it had exercised a Sacred Treasure's performance and he had a God's own power... Nagaru said that this instant movement could be sealed by touching him.

The Sacred Treasure's shape was something between a sword and a gun.

If Sougetsu comes at him, it was easy to predict what the first attack will be.

First step was firing from range.

Just as Takeru predicted, Sougetsu slowly raised the gun and pointed the tip towards him.

"《Fimbul Bullet》"

The Godless Assassin Bullet.

A sound of the trigger being squeezed had echoed. Takeru squeezed the sword's sheath and opened his eyes wide, without pulling the sword out.

He looked for an opening before he activates Demon's Heart. Look closely. Sharpen your every nerve. Concentrate your brain power on your sight alone.

An instant is enough, he has to find the best moment.

Takeru's dynamic vision exceeded the range of human understanding. Sound disappeared, all objects have ceased to move.

Sougetsu's fingertips squeezed the trigger. It was the first time Takeru seeing it. He had no choice but to think of a way to cope with magic after it was cast. During the time that moved slow and felt like eternity, Takeru forestalled the opponent's movements to see through them.

However, Sougetsu didn't move at all. That's how it was supposed to be, Takeru's superhuman eyesight was supposed to catch his movements, yet Sougetsu just completely disappeared out of his sight.

The remaining power of God. Disappearance and re-emergence. It has exceeded the concepts of speed and time. He wasn't moving instantaneously at high speed, that man has essentially disappeared.

His disappearance and re-appearance was instantaneous.

He stood beside Takeru who was standing facing forward. The muzzle was sticking to Takeru's temple as if it had been there right from the start.

So it went this far. Instant transfer was at a very simple power, yet it surpassed common sense this much, huh.

Swordsmanship could do nothing about it. Speed could do nothing about it. Coping with this power was,

———————*No.*

It could be. What foolish things you're thinking about.

Takeru noticed a contradiction and smiled.

——If he couldn't cope with it, then what was the time he was in now?

He had time to think about this. In other words, even though he couldn't cope with the movement itself, it was possible to deal with it after moving. He captured Sougetsu's in his sights as he "attacked".

——Takeru instantly lowered his upper body.

Magic was released from Naglfar's muzzle. It was just a magic bullet. It passed over his head. If it hit it might have done something to Takeru, but since it was avoided there was no point in thinking about it. He understood how to deal with it. If there was time to think, there was time to act.

It was time to respond with attack.

Sougetsu——was gone. He moved to another position, already preparing an attack from outside his field of vision, even in this moment.

Takeru's sense of touch died. He was unable to perceive the air's movement. What he needed was hearing. Switch brain control, enhance your hearing instead of sight.

——**thrumpp**!!

Sound of shooting——avoid! He twisted his body and with desperate movements focused on escaping from the place he was in. A magic bullet passed between his head and shoulder before landing in the flower flower field.

He looked at the place it was fired from and saw Sougetsu.

——Disappeared.

**click*

Hammer's sound came from behind.

"——!!"

Takeru turned around and swung his sword.

But there was nothing. Petals danced in the air. There were traces of him behind there, but he wasn't.

Sound. Attack. Avoidance. Disappearance.

Sound. Attack. Avoidance. Disappearance.

Sound. Avoidance then attack. Gone.

Sound. Predicting ahead and taking imitative. Cutting the air.

Attack. Avoidance——

——Before he noticed, he was alone on the flower field.

"Haa... haa..."

His breathing was the only sound in this delayed world.

Sougetsu was everywhere, yet nowhere. Not recognized by anyone his existence itself being uncertain, he was a void itself.

He said that was what it meant to be a God.

Did he mean this?

No attack came. There was no sound. His figure was nowhere. His existence disappeared.

Sougetsu was already gone from here.

It was a possibility. He might have identified the mythological world fragments' coordinates and moved back to the original world.

It was reasonable to think so. He was a man who did those kinds of things with ease.

《"——No, Host. He is here."》

"————"

《"Cut. Use your power to cut everything."》

Lapis' calm voice echoed inside his head.

Cut everything.

To slash the God who transcended both speed and time, he had to cut everything.

"——Yeah, you're right."

If he was still here, that would solve all problems. Takeru returned the sword to the sheath.

There was no need to aim. Takeru only had to cut everything.

This world.

Lapis...————extend!!"

Takeru instructed Lapis and she extended the blade in form of a nodachi. He didn't know how big was this world, but if it was like Heretic Alliance's headquarters, there was an end to it.

Nagaru said it wasn't as wide as it looked to be. That it was perfect for fighting with a sword.

Thanks.

Then let's make this entire world within the range of my sword.

Takeru activated 《Demon's Heart》.

His thinking concentrated on one thing. He turned into a demon who thinks of only one goal.

The thought he limit himself to——was cutting everything.

Believing that the extended blade reached the end of this world, Takeru slashed literally everything.

Flowers, sky, earth, air. His sword cut everything without exceptions.

He filled the space itself with his slashes.

If he was unable to identify where enemy would appear, if enemy attacked from outside recognition, he just had to make it so that there was no place for his enemy to exist.

Cut, cut, cut. Faster than sound, fast enough to catch up to light.

He filled this world with the sword, clad in twilight flames.

In an instant, all of it.

This world——cut it all!

"————?!!"

There was resistance. Even though he didn't see, he could tell he cut. A blast caused by sub-light speed slash has attacked enemy's body, but this impact could not kill the God. He had to use the god-slaying blade to pierce his heart or head and deal a fatal wound.

When the impact had come, Takeru's thinking returned. The extreme condition awakened Takeru's consciousness.

The earth shattered and decomposed, even in the middle of the broken world breaking again, Takeru found Sougetsu's location.

Before his consciousness reacted, he swung the sword towards that place.

However, the blow had cut the empty air.

Missed——fine, then one more time!

Takeru slashed everything again. His right eardrum burst and he lost his hearing. Several blood vessels in his right eye ruptured and blood stained his vision red. Blood spouted of his pores.

But this was the last one. He gave his life to this last blow.

"GhhhHhh!!"

A sound. He could still hear. Enemy's location.

Thinking necessary. His tenacity pulled back his consciousness. Back from Demon's Heart into Soumatou. Takeru held the sword in backhand grip and passing the blade by his flank he thrust behind himself.

His left ear caught a dull sound of piercing through meat.

Takeru returned the grip on the handle and pushing his right shoulder backwards he turned his body around.

Deeply, very deeply piercing in the blade. Even as blood spouted on his face, Takeru didn't close his eyes. Twisting the blade he pushed it without mercy.

He looked at the face of the one he pierced with the blade. He looked at the face of the man he killed.

Vomiting blood, miserably distorted, God's face.

Decaying as it was burned down by the god-slaying flame, God's true face.

"Ghh————I've been waiting... for this moment...!"

The God laughed. Miserably vomiting blood, his organs scattering around, he rejoiced passionately at an opportunity.

Takeru understood that Sougetsu was waiting for this moment. Being killed by Takeru and leading the world to destruction was this man's final goal. Now that Takeru has gained the power to become the God, that wish has clearly disappeared.

However, there was a method to accomplish it.

It was a draw.

"《Fimbulvetr Enchant》——!"

Godless Enchant.

The brass-like blade Sougetsu held let out a dull, golden flame.

With a blade piercing his belly, he swung down Naglfar's blade.

Sougetsu had lived for this moment. Driven into a corner, fallen into disadvantage, he found hope for destruction at the very last moment.

It was an unrealistic method. However, it wasn't impossible.

Mutual killing. God dies and loses his life along with God-Hunter.

If he did that, destruction would be fulfilled. The world would meet its end.

Sougetsu was correct. This was the only method to achieve destruction.

But he was also wrong. He committed the worst mistake.

In the very, very end——he challenged Takeru with a sword.

Sougetsu's resolve to draw was certain. His desperate strike was incredibly keen. It would be impossible for most people to evade, they would be cut down just like that.

However, his opponent was Kusanagi Takeru.

A manifestation of Kusanagi Double-Edge style's and the God-Hunter's contractor.

This man——could not lose against a sword.

Especially against a slash of a mere amateur who knew nothing of swordsmanship, there was no way it could reach.

Takeru calmly let go of the sword with his right hand he materialized warabite-to in it, he——in an instant, finely cut Sougetsu's arm holding Naglfar.

Thrown away, Naglfar fell behind Sougetsu.

Astonished, he spread his eyes wide open. Seeing the arm that was supposed to deliver deadly blow had turned into blood mist, he clicked his tongue and smiled.

"Hah——so it was no good after all... seems I'm not fit for this, really."

Squinting, Sougetsu declared himself to give up.

Using his left hand, Takeru pushed in the nodachi and toppled Sougetsu's body.

On the crumbling rock floating in space, Sougetsu collapsed with his limbs spread out.

Takeru looked down on him from above and raised the warabite-to he held in reverse grip.

Sougetsu did not move. Not looking away, he smiled like usual as he stared at Takeru.

The swung-down blade pierced into Sougetsu's forehead.

As Sougetsu opened his eyes nearly wide enough for his eyeballs to pop out, twilight flames burned down the God's body.

Glaring at Takeru until the very end, he who always acted aloof and composed, let out ear-deafening screams.

Listening to his screams, Takeru watched as the God's body decayed.

Armor in his head crumbled, his hair was eroded by azure color and Takeru's face covered by cracks was exposed from beneath.

In order to see with his own eyes, Takeru took off the mask.

In order to show his sworn enemy, who has killed him...

To take revenge on this man for all the grief...

"...Ku-hahaha...! I acknowledge it...it's my loss... Kusanagi Takeru."

While still screaming, enveloped by flames, he extended head towards Takeru.

The wreckage of a God has laughed.

"Satisfied? Because I am... it was fun...! It was a good life...! I'm glad I could play such a great game...!"

"..........."

"Next is your turn to lead a game...become a God and get bored in loneliness...just like I have...hah...!"

While staring at the appearance of disappearing Sougetsu, Takeru erased his demonic appearance and narrowed his eyes.

With a human face, he overlooked Sougetsu's death.

Rather than painting his expression with anger, he confronted Sougetsu with his true feelings.

"I'm different from you... even if I become God... I have someone who will be together with me."

Clenching the handle pierced into Sougetsu's forehead, he felt Lapis nod.

"I guess you can't understand it. Wishing only for destruction, you accepted solitude."

"...fufu...fu..."

"Like that, you are going to die as you laugh in loneliness. This is what you wanted, right?"

"...........fhh..."

"I'll give you destruction, just as you wanted. But I won't give you my world. I won't give you my comrades or my little sister."

Burned by the flames and turning into ashes, in the very end, Sougetsu's expression was slightly distorted with pain.

Tasting defeat for the first time since he was born, he grit his teeth in frustration.

As Sougetsu was unable to hide the humiliation with a smile, Takeru declared.

"Play destruction by yourself."

He just quietly watched over it. The destruction of Ootori Sougetsu, the culprit behind everything.

Sougetsu's ashes along with his death throes turned into flames and were sucked in by Lapis' blade.

What was his physical body, what was his power... and what was his soul, was all sucked into the blade and inside Takeru. On top of the unmoving rock, Takeru felt something alien dwell inside his body.

《"Host... I have recovered the "God's Vessel"."》

"...Yeah..."

Looking at the palm of his hand faintly shining palm, Takeru touched his face.

Flowing out of his cracking face was not blood, but memories.

"............"

He could tell the vessel dwelling inside him was trembling.

It was about to destroy the world.

Just by collecting the God's vessel, he didn't become God.

Pouring a soul inside that vessel was what qualified him to become a God.

For that sake existed 《Deification》.

"............"

He knew his life was about to run out. Takeru's body and soul was turning into something else from original, fusing with Lapis to become something different.

It wasn't just his face, cracks spread all over his body. The fingertips he touched his face with had broke and turned into sand.

Takeru couldn't see on his left eye. He didn't feel pain in his body. Sound and smell disappeared.

His heart too... has stopped crying.

"Ahh... There's no pain, nor fear left."

He was forgetting. Everything. Things unnecessary for him to become a God had poured outside through the cracks.

Memories appeared in his head and disappeared. Comrades' faces, little sister's face... faces of people he had been indebted to, they all crumbled and disappeared like pieces of candy.

And last.

The midsummer days when they were separated by a box... the days he exchanged hearts with Kiseki.

The fun and bitter times, the longest time he spent... his memories with Ikaruga.

The scent of black tea spreading inside his mouth, bringing him a smile... casual everyday life with Usagi.

Making his heart pound... Mari's smile.

Looking forward and walking with a confident expression... Ouka's face seen from the side.

They floated in his mind like fireflies before fading away.

It were very gentle memories. Even as they disappeared faintly, Takeru was glad to see his happy memories again. He was pleased to meet everyone again, in the end.

Forgetting everything, only happiness remained.

There was no despair. Only happiness.

His empty head had the warmth of the important memories remaining in it.

If it's like this... it's not so bad.

Not too bad.

"..................Let's go, Lapis."

His wrist broke and crumbled to dust.

Unable to stand he knelt down as pieces of him danced in the air.

He could hear Lapis' voice chant far away, a magic circle spread.

It wasn't azure-colored, but pure white like sunlight as it enveloped Takeru.

Looking up at the sky, he fell on his back.

He could see a single piece of azure petal ascend to the sky and escape from this unmoving world.

While chasing the petal's travel path with one eye and looking up at the twilight sky... before long, Kusanagi Takeru closed his eyelids in silence.

Chapter 5 - Let's Go Back Together?

One hour before Takeru defeated Sougetsu.

After they were swallowed by Hyakki Yakou, Lapis Lazuli heard from Mother Goose about the method to save the world and fell silent.

Killing God and becoming God. Just as Mother Goose said, it was theoretically possible. However, for that sake Lapis would have to fuse with Takeru's soul to raise it to a higher level.

In other words, they had to maintain God-Hunter form.

While 《God Hunter form》 and 《Deification》 seemed similar, they were different things. After absorbing the God's Vessel with 《Ragnarøkkr Enchant》, 《Deification》 was activated to pour the contractor's and Sacred Treasure's own soul into the vessel, allowing them to become the God. Although Gungnir could use both at the same time, it was impossible for Mistilteinn. That's why it was necessary for Lapis to receive magic power from Gungnir and instead of using her own magic power, she had to use "God's Authority" magic power to activate 《Deification》.

Lapis interrupted the silence and raised her face.

"I have a question."

"There is no time. Hurry."

"Is it possible for me to activate 《Deification》 without fusing with Host?"

Hearing Lapis' question, Mother Goose squinted sharply.

Mother Goose must have understood what was she thinking.

"...Are you asking, whether you can become God by yourself?"

"Yes."

Lapis replied without hesitation. Mother Goose sighed and shook her head.

"Impossible. A Sacred Treasure's soul alone isn't enough. That is why we need a contractor. Originally, we Sacred Treasures were weapons contracted ourselves to gods in order to fight for the position of Chief God."

"...Then what about mine and your soul?"

"It won't work. Two Sacred Treasures cannot fuse souls."

"..............."

Lapis continued to think without an expression.

She was thinking about a way to become God without involving Takeru.

Mother Goose cast her down eyes at her with compassion.

"...Those feelings of yours are noble. However, what's impossible can not be done. Even a demon's and a Sacred Treasure's souls aren't enough... even with those, it's barely enough to become a concept of a God."

"——Would it be possible were it to be God's soul?"

Hearing Lapis' words, Mother Goose tilted her head, puzzled.

"............It can't be, you..."

"Would Ootori Sougetsu's soul be enough?"

Even Lapis herself knew she was saying something outrageous.

Mother Goose understood what that meant better than anyone.

"You intend to contract with Ootori Sougetsu and fuse your souls with him...?!"

"No. I'd rather die than do that. Rather, I am asking whether I will be able to become God if I *devour that man's soul.*"

"............Devour... his soul?"

Pondering over Lapis' words, Mother Goose asked.

"You want to become not a god-slayer, but a god-eater?"

"Yes."

"Ridiculous. There is no precedent of this."

"I have experienced eating a human soul before. I once devoured my previous contractor's soul."

A memory of Kusanagi Mikoto passed through Lapis' mind and she felt pain in her chest. Because of soul fusion's failure, Kusanagi Mikoto's soul was eaten by Lapis.

It wasn't intended, it was caused by the fact Mikoto's soul was human.

The soul that doesn't balance out is sucked out and extinguished.

It has a completely different result from fusion.

To compare it with human's, *it was like eating another human's meat.*

"He isn't human, but a God."

"That man is half-human is he not? Isn't it because he was incomplete that he became a half-baked existence such as living god?"

"..........."

"I will never lose to that man's soul."

Looking at Lapis as she tried to suggest another method, Mother Goose felt tenacity similar to madness. This girl would never yield. She had no intention at all of becoming God together with Kusanagi Takeru.

"You... you think of that boy this strongly..."

"Yes. I love him."

The answer was instant and devoid of hesitation. Although she was expressionless, she spoke without looking away from Mother Goose. Mother relaxed her shoulders a little and looked at Lapis distantly.

"...You are my replica. There is no guarantee you will be able to do it. Also, whether you will be able to become God just by eating a god..."

"If there is possibility, I will make it succeed."

"If you fail... the world will be destroyed."

That is what Mother Goose was concerned about. Because she and Orochi failed to reach God's seat, she entrusted it to Lapis. It would be meaningless were Lapis to fail.

"Even if there is a possibility of the world being destroyed, I wish for Host to live in peace."

"..........."

"For him to return to that place... to return to happy days with everyone is what I wish."

In this moment, Lapis' eyes shook for the first time in front of Mother Goose as tears trickled down her cheeks.

Inside Lapis, two hearts were in conflict.

One wanted to return Takeru to where he should be. And one more. The other wanted to become an eternal existence together with Takeru, become on and spend eternity together with him.

Both were her true feelings. Both were her earnest wishes.

These tears were caused by sacrificing one of those choices.

Mother Goose stared back at Lapis.

As if seeing through everything, enveloping... she watched over Lapis like a mother.

"Lapis... are you all right with that? Knowing your feelings, I cannot help but wish for you happiness."

"..........."

"If you love him... then why not choose to walk the same path together?"

Hearing Mother Goose's kindness-filled words, Lapis wiped away her tears.

"Thank you very much."

And with a bright, clear smile she wasn't used to making, she said.

"But... I am his sword."

That was Sacred Treasure Mistilteinn's,

Lapis Lazuli's choice.

In this moment, because she loved him, she decided to deceive her master.

* * *

Feeling very comfortable, Kusanagi Takeru woke up.

"................."

He was sitting on a sofa. It was a very soft and worn-out sofa.

When he pushed onto it with his hand, the elasticity felt very pleasant making him smile.

He raised his face.

There was a small table and on it, freshly-brewed tea and biscuits.

Takeru picked up the teacup with familiar gestures and raised his back from the sofa.

He walked on the wooden floor. Whenever he stepped on the room's floor, he heard a pleasant sound of wood.

Hearing the sound of his footsteps he squinted, continuing to walk inside the room.

He passed by a laptop which was out of power.

"…………"

No one was sitting in the chair, but the way cushion was depressed was telling enough to see how much time had the person spent on it. The worn-out keyboard had worn-out keys, there were multiple sticky notes on the display and a glass bottle next to it, containing a lot of mint candies and mint sticks.

Takeru caressed the chair's edge.

Parts of pistols and rifles could be seen placed on the workbench. Among them, there was one old-fashioned rifle.

"…………"

A sticker was placed on the stock part. A deformed, cutely rabbit.

Looking at it, Takeru brought tea to his mouth with a smile.

As he walked along the wall, a clothing rest came into his sight.

"…………"

Hanging on it were a belt and guns. A dark blue hat and a striped muffler.

The belt was worn-out and leather on it, cracked-up. The pistols were old and he could tell at a glance that they were well-maintained. Bullets were removed properly and the magazine was put inside the pouch. Safety measures were maintained, he could tell the owner was methodical.

"…………"

Because the hat was washed many times it felt worn out when he poked it with his finger. As he looked at the muffler, he noticed it was mended many times.

Since the person doing it didn't seem too good at knitting, rather than fine mesh, it was thickly mended and distorted.

Unable to bear it, Takeru laughed quietly.

"…………"

After laughing for a moment, Takeru turned around and looked around the room again.

In this not too wide room, there were lots of things marking memories.

As he took a deep breath, there were various scents in it.

The smell of gunpowder and oil. Also soft scent of tea and sweets, as well as mint mixing in.

It was very complex and could not be said to be a nice smell, But it made Takeru's heart incredibly at ease.

"…………"

After finishing to drink tea he returned the cup to the table.

Pinching just one biscuit in his fingers he threw it into his mouth.

He took a step back as he chewed it.

Swallowed it and exhaled.

"………………All right."

And he turned around.

Towards the exit. Towards an old wooden door with varnish peeling off it.

He put his hand on the doorknob and turned it around.

Slowly opening the door, he let in soft light.

He knew she was there. He smiled towards the girl waiting for him to come out.

In the corridor, stood a girl wearing an azure-colored dress.

Lapis. Lapis Lazuli. My sword. My precious sword. My beloved sword.

He remembered her. She alone, was his only salvation. Losing his memory of his precious people, he was about to let go of their remnants.

But he was no longer lonely.

Because she would be together with him forever.

Takeru raised one hand in greeting towards Lapis.

"Hey... did you wait?"

"No, not really? I just came here myself."

Lapis made a soft, happy smile. They made it seem a little like a date, so he was embarrassed. Rubbing his nose with his fingers, Takeru smiled as well.

"Well then, let's go, Lapis."

"…………"

Outside the room... the platoon's room.

He tried to take a step forward to cross the doorstep.

But for some reason, he was unable to.

His leg didn't move.

Strange, thinking so Takeru looked at this feet. There was nothing abnormal in there. And yet, his body didn't move forward.

While Takeru stood there slightly flustered, Lapis' hair swayed as she took a step forward.

"Host. You stay in there."

"............?"

"You have to stay in there. You have to go back."

Turning her arms behind her waist, she said while tilting her head slightly.

Astonished, Takeru looked at her smile. There was no way he could stay in there. While it was true he wanted to stay there, if he remained in there he wouldn't get what he wanted.

Saving everything, his selfishness wouldn't come true.

"We're going, right... together."

"No. I will be going alone."

Takeru's pupils shook strongly.

"...What do you mean?"

"I alone am enough to become God. Host, go back to where you were."

Straightforwardly, briefly, Lapis said so with a smile.

His lips trembled as he was unable to understand.

"...——What is this about?!"

Takeru questioned her without hesitation.

But Lapis did not budge and just smiled towards him.

"You... you said... that you'll be with me...! You said you're okay becoming God together with me!"

"Yes. I said so. I want to be together. Forever, forever together."

"Then...——why?! Why just you... why are you leaving me behind?!"

Unable to bear it, tears gathered in his eyes. What Lapis was trying to do made his heart ache incredibly.

Why? Why? That question was all that appeared in his head.

It was close to anger. He could only consider it a betrayal. They supposedly agreed on doing something... so why did she steal a march on him?

Anger without an outlet had welled up inside him and he nearly started shouting.

"Host..."

But seeing Lapis' face, his voice was stuck.

"...Please... would you not bully me?"

Lapis raised her eyebrows with a smile and shed large tears one after another.

"I... love looking at you when you are together with everyone. I really love everyone when they are together with you."

With agitated voice she tried to convey her feelings.

"I was connected with your soul. That's why I know, just how much you love everyone... just how much you hold that place precious, I know that more than enough."

"Lapis... I...!"

"I know. Just like you love everyone, you love me the same, I know that... to a painful extent."

With her face wet with tears Lapis opened her eyes wide and looked at Takeru dearly.

"But, that is why... I cannot take you with me. I don't want to take you... please understand."

Lapis' selfish words made it seem like his chest was about to burst.

However, Takeru didn't reach his hand out, only embraced his own shoulders.

Facing this situation, he was made realize.

Yeah... I see... that's right.

Staring at the tears falling on the floor, he clenched his teeth.

What I was trying to do to my comrades... was this.

Comrades... although only faintly, he could remember. Surely Lapis must have cancelled her fusion with Takeru's soul. Or maybe gave her memories to him?

It didn't matter. Anyway, he recalled it.

Takeru did the same thing to his comrades as Lapis did to him.

Kept silent, betrayed, and tried to sacrifice himself alone. He thought that was fine. He knew his comrades would be in pain, he could imagine just how painful it was.

But in the end, that was just his imagination. Having it pointed out at him this way, he realized the truth for the first time.

...This is... unbearable...! As if I could withstand this... pain...!

Just how selfish he was, just how much he made light of his comrades feelings, he was made realized all of this.

His tears overflowed without stopping, he was irritated by himself not being able to do anything. His comrades watched over Takeru as he went off alone. Although it was urgent, Ouka and Mari, Ikaruga and Usagi... they all had no choice but to send him off. Now, he could tell very well just how did they feel.

What "everyone will be all right without me if they're together"... what "you are not alone"...! I had no right to tell them anything like that...!

Takeru fell on his knees and curled up. He sobbed, unable to withstand the pain.

Lapis approached him as he cried.

She gently pat his head.

The warmth of her hand healed Takeru's pained heart.

"...I'm... sorry. Please, forgive me."

"............Lapis."

"Please...go back...please...be happy..."

He held Lapis' hand stroking his head and put it against his cheek.

In order to feel her warmth, in order not to lose it.

Unable to hold her back. Unable to hold on to her existence. Crushed by helplessness, Takeru called Lapis' name time after time again.

"Lapis... L-Lapis............Lapis...!!"

Pathetically shedding tears he clung onto Lapis' hand.

Lapis too, made a same expression as Takeru and stroked his cheek to feel his warmth.

"Host..."

Feeling that wasn't enough, Lapis stretched her both arms towards Takeru's head.

Takeru too, embraced her body.

The two's lips overlapped as they confirmed each other's existences. Because they knew this is the last time, they overlapped their lips fiercely, passionately.

Their first meeting was the worst of all.

Thinking back on it, he was deceived and made to form contract. Having his life and contract on scales, he wasn't allowed to refuse...

However, the two were always together. In difficult times, when in pain, during casual life, and when happy.

Although it definitely wasn't a long time, the two were always moving on together.

As sword and its user.

Host and partner.

Being precious existences to one another.

When their lips separated, with a face flushed red, Lapis exhaled hotly and looked up at Takeru.

"I will be by your side... forever... even if you don't notice me."

Takeru had stopped crying and stared intently back at Lapis.

"I will continue to protect your happiness forever..."

Lapis also stopped crying and gently smiled.

Takeru too, greeted the parting with a smile.

"I'll notice. After all you are——"

————————My sword."

Hearing those words, Lapis.

———That's right, exactly. Host.

Lapis made the happiest ever,

Like that of a maiden whose love was fulfilled,

Bright smile, like a sunflower.

Chapter 6 - I'll Cut You Down!

The blue sky was spreading above.

Azure sky without a single cloud continued forever.

He didn't think it was beautiful. He couldn't think of such an empty sky as beautiful.

It was just like inside his heart... empty.

"........................."

Still looking at the sky, Kusanagi Takeru shed tears.

This sky was the sky he knew well. It wasn't cracked-up nor in twilight.

It was his own world's sky, he was used to.

He has come back.

The world was still here. There were no signs of it collapsing, the blue sky spread endlessly. As he looked around there were just ruins and ash left behind by Hyakki Yakou, but he could tell at a glance that the world wasn't destroyed.

"............Really... Lapis... you alone..."

Takeru clenched his fist and put it against his chest.

The world was saved. God died and the world was protected.

Takeru's wish to save everything has come into fulfillment.

............Aside from one person, his partner called Lapis.

"...nhh..."

He couldn't honestly rejoice. There was a sense of loss inside his chest.

Fallen on the ground with his arms spread, he sank into disappointment.

"............"

Suddenly, feeling heat on his back Takeru raised his body.

When he touched it, a piece of paper covered in ash was sticking to his back.

The piece of paper broke apart from where he touched it, but there were slight traces of a magic circle on it.

There was no mistake. It was a transfer magic's instant charm.

He furrowed his eyebrows and searched his memory. Then recalled his farewell with Nagaru on the fragment of mythological world.

Certainly, back then she put her hand on his back.

Takeru brushed away the ash and put a hand on his cheek.

"...ha-haha... that person, just how amazing is she..."

While letting out dry laughter he shook his head saying "good grief".

Did that tanuki girl predicted everything this far? That he wouldn't become God and Lapis would sacrifice herself?

It was unthinkable, but the fact that he couldn't deny it was what made Hoshijiro Nagaru scary.

"..............."

He remembered Nagaru. His memory which was supposed to be gone, was back. Not just that, his sense of pain too... even his blind left eye was cured completely.

There was not a single scratch on his body. It was perfectly clear as if he was just born.

Surely, Lapis has healed him. Of course, not as a Magical Heritage nor Sacred Treasure.

"She's a God, after all..."

His voice trembled, tears started flowing again. Pathetic. Beyond help. Although it was hard to say he sorted out his feelings, back then he parted with Lapis convinced it would be the best.

Mocking himself, Takeru curled up and cried.

The pain of a loss wouldn't heal so quickly.

But... he had to bear it. He had that responsibility and it was also a punishment for his sins.

——That moment, sunlight was reflected by something on his side provoking his eyes.

Squinting, Takeru noticed it.

".................."

It was an azure sword pierced into the ground.

"Lapis..."

The moment he saw it he knew that no voice would reply.

As usual, magic power was dwelling inside it. As a Magical Heritage this sword would respond to its owner's requests.

However, there was no Lapis inside it. What remained, was only Lapis' vessel.

It was a soulless sword called Mistilteinn.

"..............."

Takeru stopped extending his hand towards the sword and stared at it.

He recalled Lapis' voice.

『"I will be by your side... forever... even if you don't notice me."』

He recalled Lapis' warmth.

『"I will continue to protect your happiness forever..."』

Strength has returned to Takeru's eyes which were overflowing with tears.

『"——Host. You stay in there. You have to stay in there. You have to go back."』

——That's right.

You have to go back.

To that place.

To your comrades.

He was requested to, by his partner.

To become happy.

If you have time to cry in a place like this, better hurry. Struggle.

Hurry and run back.

Don't forget you are Kusanagi Takeru.

"That's right................................. let's go back. To where everyone is."

Takeru extended his stopped hand and grasped the sword's handle.

There was no warmth in it, no voice came.

However, it was a proof that she existed.

She must be his side. Even at this moment.

So puff up your chest.

Go back home proudly.

Takeru stood firmly on his two legs and put the sword in the sheath.

The sound of the collar clashing onto the sheath reached his ear.

From that moment, Takeru was no longer shedding tears.

Kusanagi Takeru who was selfish and once decided something, would never yield, has returned.

"...All right...!"

He raised his face to look forward.

In order to return to his comrades.

In order to take a new step forward.

"————Oh? You're making quite a depressed expression for a world's savior... is that a hero's face?"

Takeru immediately stopped his leg.

Right from the first step, an obstacle has appeared on his new path.

"............"

He tensed his shoulders after stopping in tracks.

He was surprised only for an instant. It was unknown how many times was he astonished, made shiver and despair by this voice so far.

It could be said he finally got used to it. It was always like this. He came out with timing like this. Whenever it seemed like everything was settled, he suddenly popped out.

Takeru closed his eyes tempted to sigh and once again put his hand on the sword.

Holding the sheath with the other hand he grasped the handle and turned around towards the voice.

Wind blew and made his hair sway. On top of the rubble covered with ash and dust, that guy stood there facing Takeru. Like an exaggerated actor he let his hair blaze in the wind as he looked Takeru's way with serious look in his eyes.

"What happened? Tell your big bro everything. Can it be that you failed to save everything?"

"............"

"...Whoaah, no answer?! Must be bull's-eye... what did you give up on? Hmmm, mm-hmm... Since you came back alone it means..."

"…………"

"——Ahh, it was your partner? That azure girl, did she become God instead of you? Or did you sacrifice her yourself?"

"…………"

"That's it! Bingo?! Aren't I smart!"

Talking ridiculousness he tried to provoke Takeru by making lots of clamor.

Good grief, this man was a genius when it came to annoying others. However, his eyes were serious. Glaring at Takeru he made a smile with just the tips of his lips.

Happy from the bottom of his heart. Rejoicing from the bottom of his heart. He stared at Takeru's despair, savoring it.

Takeru faced directly towards the man, confronting him.

The man glared at Takeru while his blonde hair swayed furiously on the wind.

——Kusanagi Takeru and Haunted faced each other under eerie, cloudless sky.

"...So boring provocations won't make you budge. I can tell even if you don't answer, seems lik you tasted quite the despair."

"Despair? Not really, I immediately cut down and discarded it."

Haunted snorted and raised his both hands.

"Looks like it. So it was no good... a *mere* God was unable to make you despair."

"Yeah, despair sucks ass and I have no intention of letting my sword rust."

"Aww, thaaat's the momentum. I don't like it, but I have to praise you. Thanks to you the world was saved. With this, despair will continue eternally... I am honestly grateful to you. Thanks, you piece of shit."

"You're welcome, you piece of shit. Don't make me laugh. Continue? It ends here."

The wind blew again.

Until the wind finished blowing, the two remained silent.

"...I come back and the first person I meet is you... you a stalker or something? Did you wait while politely pretending to die?"

"Such an awful accusation, I have no interest in men... But it's true that I was waiting. See, I believed that you will come back."

"Disgusting."

"You say that now?"

"On what basis did you believe?"

"Of course I would believed. You need no basis to believe. You are my enemy and I longed to make you despair in this situation, ceaselessly believing in it."

Wind blew for the third time.

The wind gradually grew stronger and started letting out rumbling sounds as it wound around the two.

"Y'know... until now, I fought enemies while giving myself a reason to... for myself, for my comrades, for my sister."

"I really want to retort saying it's ultimately all for your own sake, oh well. And like that, you saved almost everything, I won't deny that."

"Yeah... but there's just one, one guy whom whenever I fight, any reason I use feels like an excuse. No matter what I think of, I just end up wanting to cut the guy up."

"Ohh, what a coincidence. I have one person like that too."

"And... he humiliated me with a sword."

"Yeah, he stole despair from me."

"I won't bear it until I get my pride back."

"I will not stand it until I crush his hope to dust."

The two pulled out their swords from their sheath at the same time.

Sheaths rubbed against the blades letting out sounds similar to a bell.

Takeru pulled out the azure katana.

Haunted pulled out a jet black rapier.

As if proud of their weapons the two pulled out their swords.

"Well then... let's begin. Continuation of that time."

"I came here intending that right from the start. You don't know just how long have I waited for this moment."

Takeru bared his fangs, Haunted raised the tip of his mouth in a smile.

There was no longer any need for talk. The two were bound by fate.

Were he to look, Takeru would find plenty of reasons to fight against him. Haunted stole Mari's family from her, killed Ikaruga's sister, cornered Kiseki's heart... if he included more details there would be no end to it. And there surely was plenty of things Takeru didn't know.

But——surpassing those reasons, there was will inside him telling him he has to cut Haunted down.

Narrowing it down, he realized it's "aversion". Takeru aiming for hope and Haunted, aiming for despair. It was natural that the two who were polar opposites would feel aversion towards one another.

However, it was pointless to draw such a line between them. Polar opposites, reverse cognate aversion... there was no need for such complicated explanations.

Naming the aversion simply came very well to him.

Indeed so.

——He pisses me off.

That's all.

"…………"

"…………"

Wind did not blow for the fourth time.

What was in that place, were blue sky, silence and rubble.

It was the best place for cutting each other up.

There was nothing to get in their way, no one to stop them.

Slash the enemy plenty, get slashed plenty yourself——and cut him down.

The two erased their smiles and in the silence they focused their nerves onto combat.

Takeru raised his sword up and pierced the enemy with his red, demon eyes.

Haunted stretched his left behind himself and clenching the sword with his fist he held it near his chest.

Even after losing its soul, Takeru's Mistilteinn responded to its master's request.

A magic circles appeared and their bodies was covered with armor from his feet up to his head.

Takeru with an azure one. Haunted with a dark one which seemed like it was painted with night.

Once complete, their blades sparkled.

And——

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style's initiate, Kusanagi Takeru——I'll cut you down no matter what!

——Prepare yourself, Sorcerer!!"

"Very well! I will bestow it upon you! The despair!

——I will cut you! Witch Hunterrr!!"

Like previously, the two clashed.

They kicked off the ground at the very same time. Heading straight for each other, they released their first attack. Takeru slashed vertically from above, Haunted did a twisted thrust from his heart.

It should be impossible for the two attacks to meet. They were a "point" and a "line". With a slash and a thrust, it turned into a match as to which one would reach the opponent first.

However, those two were an exception. Whether it was a line or a point, speed, skill or technique, they would inevitably meet. They didn't aim for that, it was fated that would happen.

——**thuddd**!!!!

A sound of impact unthinkable to come from sword attacks had spread and dust swept up as if an explosion had occurred.

The two blows balanced each other. They were equal. One sword was blown away by the other's impact and they opened distance.

A cloud of dust turned their visibility zero. Wrapped in cloud of dust they glared at each other and ——pushing through it they once again moved forward.

Their gazes intersected. Killing intent full of desire to cut had caused lightning to strike down.

This time the two didn't leave everything to strength. They used skill.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style, Yamata no Orochi!"

Takeru went at full power right from the start. Eight strikes released practically at the same time. A technique impossible to use with just a human body, a technique that exceeded human bodily performance. Both vertical and horizontal attacks coming from above in 180 degrees.

There was no way to avoid it but to move backwards. Haunted who had stepped forward could not avoid it even if he leaped backwards in this moment.

Therefore he had to pull out his best of his slender body.

"Hyahaha!!"

Haunted flexed his rapier, Dáinsleif, bending it like a snake and slid it into the gap between attacks.

He aimed at Takeru's face. Haunted wasn't resolved for honorable defeat. He could not die as many times as he did before. In battle with Kurogane Hayato he managed to make Hayato think that his stock of lives ran out and he died, but in fact his stock decreased from two to one.

If he dies this time, he would really fall into hell. However, Haunted wasn't afraid. What he feared was not being able to make Kusanagi Takeru taste despair. Bring it on, laughed the necromancer. This urgency, the smell of battle, this thrill of being a single mistake away from death.

"It's despairlicious! Can't get enough of this!"

The rapier slips past the eight strikes and approached Takeru's eyes.

——Takeru didn't pull back. The thrust wiggled like a snake and approached Takeru's right eye. In state with Soumatou activated Takeru twisted his head as much as he could. The blade brushed past his eyebrow's edge and blood spouted out.

But he did avoid it. Because of Dáinsleif's characteristics Takeru's wound was not healed, but it was perfect if the damage was reduced to this much.

"——AAAaAa!!"

He smashed the eight hits. He was confident of his victory. Against Haunted, he let out every technique while confident of his victory. Otherwise it would be impossible for him to win.

However, in that moment——Haunted did something unbelievable, he shrunk his body parts to an utmost limit.

"Kihhi!"

Magic? A type of body strengthening? Who cares, he evaded it!

Just like the rapier, Haunted's body turned slim like a string and passed between the slashes.

This guy was able to freely fiddle with his body. It was something only one who knew everything about human body could do. It was easy for him to shrink his muscles and body fat, as well as soften bones.

Because of momentum caused by Takeru's missing the target, his sword pierced the ground.

After avoiding Yamata no Orochi, Haunted returned to his original size with a popping sound.

"What the hell's that...!"

"I used to work in a ciiircussss——!!"

He was smiling after accomplishing something so ridiculous. Although, he had no time to smile.

Takeru was full of openings. The rapier's cleave approached him. Although a rapier wasn't very suitable for slashing, that distinction was pointless when it came to Dáinsleif.

He concentrated all his nerves on bending his knees alone. Dáinsleif's blade passed over his head and the blade cut his hair. Takeru succeeded in evading, but he still had a huge opening.

Haunted's swordsmanship was flexible. His sword twisted like a snake and his "thrust" changed trajectories. Takeru saw the rapier change its trajectory and approach his shoulder. The thrust that was supposed to avoid his eyeball had let out squeeky sound and unnaturally approached the back of his head. From that posture it was impossible to thrust with the sword's tip at Takeru's head.

However, Haunted's arm was bent in opposite direction. His swordsmanship really was like acrobatics.

Takeru couldn't avoid. It was impossible.

So I won't avoid! I'll blow him away!

"OoAarr——ghh!!"

"?!"

Pushing his right hand on the ground for support, raised his bent left leg and burst into Haunted's waist.

It landed so nicely even Takeru himself was surprised.

Haunted's body bent in 90 degrees in the waist and was awkwardly blown away. The rapier's tip didn't reach Takeru and rolled together with Haunted on the ground.

He killed the impact from the kick by piercing the sword into the ground.

Falling on his knees, he turned his frustration towards Takeru.

"A swordsmanship freak *kicking*? Aren't you embarrassed...?!"

"We're killin' each other here, there ain't place for embarrassment, you dumb bastard...!"

Takeru and Haunted pulled out their weapons from the ground and making a pointless wing in mid-air, they once again confronted each other.

There was no meaning behind that swing. It was just a show of anger.

"That style pisses me off, leaves everything to power as always!"

"That's my line! You're wriggling like a damn eel!"

"I hate Kusanagis Double-Edged style!"

"I won't acknowledge your swordsmanship!"

They say whatever's on their tongue, each of them talking as whatever they wanted made it seem like a kids' fight.

However, both of them were serious. They disliked each other so much they couldn't bear it.

The opponent's every move pissed them off to no end, made them sick and disgusted to the bone. The blood vessels on their temples cramped up furiously.

"From here on I'll be dictating the pace...!"

"As if I'd let you, from the start to end this'll be my field...!"

Haunted once again pulled back the sword in a thrust stance, confronting him Takeru took "seigan no kamae" stance.

The two gripped the sword's handle as if to gather strength and when they reached boiling point, they burst.

A storm of point attacks assaulted Takeru. Haunted's continuous strikes were so fast that Takeru was barely able to see them with Soumatou. Receiving them with a sword, he withstood it.

Takeru's stance was a very orthodox one, a very basic swordsmanship stance that allowed one to respond with both defense and attack. A stance with the sword raised up and set horizontally. A stance with a sword set low and with slashing edge pointing upwards. It was possible for him to easily change his combat styles into these stances. That was ideal for responding with an attack after defending.

A single strike after receiving a storm of thrusts. A slash from above from his basic stance, a basic "men" strike in kendo.

Takeru wasn't just probing the opponent, his technique started from this attack.

This simple slash was a trap. Just like Haunted's storm of thrust was a trap that invited Takeru's attack, Takeru's behavior was also a trap that invited his enemy to parry.

The slash approached Haunted's head. As if waiting for Takeru's attack, Haunted has interrupted his thrusts and pulled his rapier's blade as to entangle it with Takeru's attack.

The long sword's base has rubbed against the rapier's blade.

**kreee...eeek*!*

Received it. Parried it. As the blades rubbed against one another, a distinctive metallic sound echoed. The rapier Haunted swung had bent to an abnormal level turning circular, and then literally——wound around Takeru's long sword.

From among people Takeru knew, only Orochi could parry attack so violently. Along with a creaky sound, Takeru's attack was slipping behind Haunted's back.

He was waiting for this moment.

"I told you didn't I, that this is my field——! Ghost Light Firefly!"

Takeru initiated his technique. By parrying, Takeru shocked Haunted who was convinced that he took advantage of Takeru's attack.

For Takeru has parried a parry.

Using the power that was pushing the sword back, he drew an arc and flanked the rapier's blade.

"Ah?!"

Having his parry returned back at him, Haunted's body staggered greatly. What shocked him was the fact that despite intending to use Takeru's attack to swing back at him, he ended up being the one receiving a sword swing.

It wasn't his first time seeing this. Before fighting Hayato, Takeru had demonstrated this technique when the two fought. Takeru possessed techniques that Haunted could do nothing despite knowing them.

Finding a large opening, Takeru did not let it go.

Using this delicious opportunity he would bite in even harder!

"OOOOoOOhhh!!"

True-Light style's Wolf Blade. The slash also called "reverse wind" which came from below and upwards was a technique that left a lot to pure strength. The entire body weight and body springs utilization caused Takeru's sword to approach with a momentum similar to that of a wolf leaping at prey's throat.

"Don't underestimate MEeEee!!"

Haunted screamed and fought back. Putting his rapier against Takeru's sword he slid along its blade. Bending his head to strongly he extended his arms holding the sword to the limit.

The rapier's blade clashed onto the collar and Takeru's blade stopped at the tip of Haunted's chin. Although dreaded by the unexpected way it was prevented, Takeru did not stop. By striking the back of his own sword with his shoulder, he repelled the Rapier that was pushing against his sword's collar.

It was an application of Double-Edged style's Monk with Iron Mallet. In the middle of using another technique, and not with a fist but by tackling the sword with his shoulder, he pushed the slash forward.

Repelled, Haunted was thrust backwards. Using the recoil from when he used Monk with Iron Mallet, Takeru immediately attacked Haunted again.

Ghost Light Firefly never stopped. Whether the opponent used his attack or any other "power", Takeru further accelerated using that power.

Parry, be parried, and parry the parry again. By doing so he could increase the speed and power without end. Haunted's specialty were thrusts. They didn't attack straightforwardly but had distorted trajectories and since they were released from acrobatic postures, they were hard to read.

However, not to an extent where he couldn't deal with them. Just as Takeru declared, he held the strength to dictate the battle's pace.

Before long, Takeru's slashes surpassed his opponent's speed and he started overpowering Haunted.

The memory Takeru forgot before he separated from Lapis. Although he really didn't like it, Haunted's parries reminded him of his training with Orochi. He received Orochi's guidance in the Magic Academy and the two crossed swords. They enjoyed themselves as they increased speed.

His master, Orochi said,

Read the flow, ride the flow.

However, if you ride the flow too much you will get caught by surprise. Don't miss the change in flow.

Open your eyes wide, catch a glimpse of it. While maintaining the flow, don't overlook Haunted's tiniest move.

Taking a step forward with the right leg, Haunted released a thrust in a way he showed his back to Takeru.

From above, aiming low, the flying fish jumped out of water and once again charged at Takeru while thrusting the rapier's tip at him.

The rapier's blade bent into an arc, aiming for Takeru's forehead. Takeru took a stance with the sword high and pointing downwards. Pulling his left leg back and to the side he held the sword overhead to protect it.

But the next moment, that thrust drew a different trajectory from the predicted one. Haunted twisted his wrist slightly.

——Along with a squeak, the arcing trajectory has turned into a reverse arc in an instant. It was like a moon changing from a first quarter into the second quarter.

The thrust was approaching from above, but had changed into pushing upwards.

Passing by Takeru's defense as he protected his head, the needle-like sword tip approached Takeru's throat. The change in the flow. By changing attack pattern, Haunted decided to take control of it.

Takeru read it——but he could not handle it. It was impossible for him to defend from his posture. Even Ghost Light Firefly could not make perfect defense real. Ultimately, it only parried attacks. It was meaningless unless he could receive the attack.

Therefore, he decided to rely on something other than his skill.

Taking his left hand off the handle on the sword maintaining the stance, he set it up as if he was holding something in it.

"Kodachi!"

Even though it didn't respond, it should have.

Even if you don't have a soul, I believe you are my sword.

Lapis...!!

There was no answer to his call.

However——without any sound, a kodachi appeared in his left hand. Takeru grasped the handle strongly and holding it in reverse-grip he brushed away the thrust approaching his throat.

Along with a metallic sound, Haunted's attack was blocked.

Takeru used the kodachi to repel the rapier with as much strength as possible. As a result of a parry's impact, Haunted was slightly blown away.

Releasing his stance, Takeru raised the sword upwards taking exaggerated posture.

"Double-Edged style——Baboon Menace!"

Although it was a technique used as a faint against magical organisms, if it actually hit it had plenty of power. Haunted clenched his teeth and attempted to avoid the swung-down sword.

However, because he was repelled, his legs weren't touching the ground.

Twisting his body was his limit.

"——Gghah...!"

Takeru's blow slashed Haunted's body diagonally from the shoulder. Although it was shallow, Haunted's armor was broken and blood spurted from his torso.

Their gazes met again.

While Takeru's gaze said "serves you right", Haunted smiled joyfully while gritting his back teeth.

"That's how it has to be! You only are yourself when holding that sword!"

"I don't need you to tell me that... Lapis and I are the strongest!"

"Ha! So he says! What do you think, Nacht?"

When Haunted called that name,

《"Let's prove it, prove that we are above them."》

A flat voice sounded in their heads.

Dáinsleif. During the mock battle tournament assault, Takeru heard her voice just once. She was the personality of an S-class Magical Heritage which competed with Lapis.

Takeru did not forget her performance. Seeing Haunted kick off the ground and retreat backwards, Takeru stopped Ghost Light Firefly and braced himself.

A sound of countless number of objects piercing the air has spread. Haunted swung his sword around as he leaped backwards.

This action was not pointless and Takeru was aware of that.

The residua of slashes, and——

"Dance! ——Entertain me!"

——Flying slashes.

Takeru requested an analysis filter in a hurry. Attaching a membrane made of magic power to his retina, he visualized the invisible slashes.

His vision dimmed slightly. However, when Takeru has visualized Haunted's slashes it was already too late.

"——Khh!"

He swung his sword quickly to strike them down. Out of the flying slashes there were two he failed to destroy, they grazed his shoulder and his side.

Blood spurted like a fountain. Although it wasn't a fatal injury, it was one he could not heal. Takeru forcibly covered the wounds with armor. When he first fought against Haunted and was wounded, he had a hole opened in his lung. Compared to the pain back then, this was nothing.

However, it took two seconds to block the wounds——meanwhile the space between him and Haunted was filled with a dreadful number of residual slashes.

In the middle of numerous slashes remaining in the air, Haunted spread his arms and shrugged.

"My partner is also really enthusiastic this time. However, she's a little frustrated too. Thanks to you sacrificing your partner, the best opportunity to take revenge is gone."

Hearing Haunted's words, Nacht snorted.

《"I'm not frustrated. I only see that azure girl as a sword As long as her performance as a sword remains, I can break her."》

"Nfufu♪ or so she says?"

Haunted stroked Dáinsleif's blade as if to boast of his sword. Holding a nodachi in his right hand and a kodachi in his left, Takeru snorted at Haunted's provocation.

"...Then how about we make sure of it. Let's settle who stands above...!"

Grasping the nodachi in front of himself, Takeru made the azure blade shine brilliantly.

Haunted too, held the black sword in front of himself like a knight.

Proud of their weapons, the two clashed again.

"Let's start——"

"——The main course!"

Crossing blades in both hands, Takeru charged forward.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

He didn't think of avoiding. As long as he sees the residual slashes, they were not a problem.

If there are obstacles in front of you, cleave 'em all down!

Lapis whom he held in his hand shook the air and let out a bell-like sound.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA——!"

Haunted opened his mouth to laugh loudly as he swung his sword.

The still-remaining residual slashes attacked Takeru all at once.

Just like guided missiles, they all assaulted him without fail.

Running straight, Takeru struck down the slashes. The dark red slashes clashed onto Takeru's sword and broke like glass.

They were brittle. Compared to the sword Haunted was actually swinging, they seemed to be made of candy.

"As if something like this will stop me and Lapis!!"

Ten, twenty, thirty. Takeru rushed madly ahead as he crushed the slashes.

Smashing with his everything.

In order to prove that he and his partner are the strongest!

"Your way of living is like that of a locomotive. I'm unimpressed by how you only look ahead of you——!!"

thump! Haunted suddenly stomped his right leg.

Beneath Takeru who had been rushing in a single pattern, appeared a wriggling black magic circle.

While dealing with slashes he looked beneath his feet and shivered.

Momentarily——**THUDD**!

A huge whale-like monster who looked like it just came out of sea, had jumper out from beneath Takeru's feet. Pushed away by the whale monster, Takeru was blown into the sky.

Haunted put his head over his forehead and whistled as he watched Takeru turn small in the sky.

"It's a pet I've been keeping since I was a kid, I let it out first time in a while and here it is, even bigger than before!"

He didn't think summoning magical organisms during his sword fight was unrefined or anything. Takeru was probably the same, he too probably would use any means to win. There were no rules in this battle. If there was one, it would be a rule where you die the moment you hold back.

Cowardice, blasphemy, heresy. Both of them welcomed it all.

《"There is no time for pointless chatter. He's coming."》

Surprised by Nacht's voice, Haunted stared at the whale monster swimming in the sky. The moment he heard a cry that sounded like a blowing horn, something ran on top of the whale monster. Seeing Takeru run on in a spiral with the sword pierced in, Haunted happily swung his sword sideways.

Immediately after the whale monster has turned into magic particles as a result of Takeru's counter-attack, Haunted made several magic circles appear and summoned an army of variants from inside, sending the army into the sky. 《Belladona Forest》. By opening a gate to another world, Haunted continued summoning an army of low-level magical organisms as long as his magic power lasted.

An abnormal army approached Takeru as he fell from the sky.

Takeru demonstrated that when facing Kusanagi Double-Edged style, using variants was the height of foolishness. Using various Double-Edged style's techniques, he slashed up the army of monsters.

Avoiding what he could not handle by ejecting magic power, Takeru descended right above Haunted.

Haunted grasped Nacht's blade and instructed her to harden the blade. When the strength and hardness of the blade raised to the limit he affixed the blade in slightly curved shape, then returned it to the sheath. Since the sheath was not a Magical Heritage, it was bent and distorted by the blade.

The slender, straight sword such as rapier could not be used for quick draw techniques. Although it was possible by slightly bending the blade, it didn't have much meaning.

However, it was a fact that this stance made it easy to match the incoming attack. It was perfect for dealing with a fast-moving opponent. Of course, he also did it out of pure interest as well, wanting to try it at least once.

"——————Come...!! I'll smack you down like a fly...!"

He had no intention of avoiding. Even if he tried to avoid, Takeru would correct his aim by ejecting magic power and come crashing from above. That's what Haunted felt.

That's why a direct confrontation. Haunted decide to play with him.

——Takeru started to rotate vertically in the sky. Since his left arm was injured in the whale monster's attack he could not use the kodachi. He transformed the sword into a huge zweihander.

He approached the surface Haunted was standing on, having a perfect grasp on their distance. It was a technique he used countless times, his body knew the perfect timing to smash the attack in.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——"

Rotating to the limit and on the verge of clashing onto the ground, Takeru released his technique towards Haunted's head.

"——Mantis Slope!"

At the same time, Haunted pulled out the warped rapier from the sheath and bending his upper body he released the quick draw.

Although the enormous zweihander was overwhelmingly more powerful than the rapier, the strength of the rapier could block any impact.

The blades have approached one another.

"————"

The moment Takeru's sword hit the rapier, the zweihander changed into a tanto.

Haunted turned speechless in shock. The rapier which was pushing against the zweihander's huge blade had cut the air as the zweihander disappeared, and Takeru slipped by to slash Haunted's left arm with the tanto.

——**slsshp**!!

At the same time as Takeru landed, the earth caved in and swelled up at the same time. Having his left arm cut off with the tanto, Haunted cramped his face with frustration. Takeru looked up at him from his landing posture and returning the sword shape to a nodachi, he clenched it with his right hand.

"...Ghhh...!!"

"...AAAaaa...!"

Dáinsleif held by Haunted let out a creaky sound.

Holding the sword in shape of a nodachi, Takeru glared with flame in his red demon eyes.

"KHAAAAAaAAaAAAaaaaa!!"

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoOOoOo!!"

And——the two's sword fight was resumed.

Both of them used one arm. Their exhaustion wasn't as light as to allow them to focus completely on parrying.

They were completely reckless. Using all the strength they had they slashed at the bastard in front of them.

The blades met with a high-pitched sound. Takeru's response with techniques also eventually turned into very basic movements with his sword. Haunted's peculiar Western swordsmanship had also warped and started losing its shape, as he turned into a beast swinging around its fang.

Blood splattered, meat was torn, everything around them was dyed red. It was unknown whose were these wounds or whose was the blood.

They were both full of wounds.

And yet, anger didn't allow them to stop their bodies.

They couldn't allow the person in front of them to exist. That's what the two felt right from the start.

I hate how he acts. I hate how he thinks. I feel sick hearing his goals. His voice gives me a headache, it's uncomfortable to the point of barfing. If I could stomp on his face I'd surely greet a happy morning next day.

I can't physiologically accept this guy's existence.

They both understood to a painful extent that they both felt the aversion. This guy is strong. There are things about he's far better at than me, they thought. If they were proper humans they would have become worthy rivals for one another.

However——I will never acknowledge him. I'll pass on the mutual acknowledgement.

He's my enemy. A hateful existence I need to kill.

The two hated each other to no end. Got annoyed by the other to the limit.

I won't allow him to live——!

I won't stop until I cut him with my own hand——!

I won't feel good until cut him down——!

"OOOOAAAAARGGH!!"

"NGHRRRRRAAAAAAHHH!'

Both of them shouted as they cut each other with their selfish pride.

The despair. The hope. Those things disappeared somewhere.

Takeru, the child of swordsmanship was gone.

Haunted, the child of despair was also nowhere to be found.

What remained were two hideous beasts.

It was unknown how long has the exchange of attack and defense... no, exchange of attacks, alone has continued. The sun floating above the blue sky was right above them. Sun burned their beat-up bodies. Although they were in the middle of winter, their bodies were so hot they couldn't bear it. Their field of vision was hazy due.

Exchanging several hundred, several thousands of slashes the two approached their limit. Blood has dried on top of their bodies and it felt like blood flowing inside their bodies turned into sand. With their bodies heavy, they couldn't move well. But they did not stop. They wouldn't stop until they cut down the other.

"......!!"

Takeru raised Lapis up and swung her down on Haunted's face.

His speed was high, but because his posture and step-in were poor it was easy to avoid.

"......!!"

Haunted was able to pull back half of his body. Unable to completely avoid it, it had cut his shoulder. Suppressing the blood that was coming out, he staggered backwards.

Pissed off by himself retreating, Haunted let out a thrust.

Takeru tried to avoid it, but stumbling over the rubble his posture broke and his neck was gouged.

And he fell on his knees.

The distance between them was one meter. In front of him, there was a man struggling for his breath with a pathetic look on his face.

Realizing that they were in the same state, annoyed the two.

They stood up with force of stubbornness.

Staggering, they stood face to face.

Exhaling like beasts, baring their teeth they glared at each other. And the next moment——twisting their necks they head-butted each other at the very same time.

"Ghaah..."

"Khhaa..."

Because of the impact they dealt on one another, they staggered backwards and stopped five meters away from each other.

They both exhaled. They exhaled in order to fight. With a hand on the forehead they both shook their heads in pain and glared through fingers at the opponent.

Investigating the opponent's will to fight and damage received.

It was the same. This exhaustion, will to fight, they were equal.

Convinced, they squinted.

——Convinced that next would be last.

The next attack would most likely deprive one of them of their life.

That was what this distance, this interval meant.

They calmed their breath and stretched their backs.

The aversion and beastly impulses disappeared, the two returned back to being humans.

"Make sure... to give it your all into this strike, not to leave regrets... Kusanagi Takeru."

"...Let's settle this... Haunted."

They faced off.

The time to smash their anger against one another was over.

At the end, they swung their swords for the sake of things they believed in.

Haunted, for despair.

So that he can purely chase after despair.

"Killing you here is the best despair for me. That won't change. The despair of your death will not touch just you, but also extend to various other people. Like a seed sprouting, it would cause flowers to bloom everywhere."

"............"

"I will kill you in order to see that. Tasting the despair of *all of you* is my current way of living."

Haunted set up his sword in front like a knight and clad himself in magic power.

Black, similar to the night magic power built a magic circle beneath his feet and darkness wrapped around Dáinsleif's blade.

《Berserk Enchantment》. While simultaneously forcing bodily and mental madness, it granted probably the greatest destructive power among all Magical Heritages existing in this world.

The last strike.

Haunted intended to put in all of his own and his partner's power into this strike.

"…………"

Takeru looked at the sword he was clenching in his right hand, at Mistilteinn.

Until now he exchanged sword strikes with this guy for his own sake. Although this time too, it was for his own sake, but this time it was for the sake of his own stubbornness and pride.

However... this strike wasn't the same.

"I…………"

Staring at Mistilteinn... staring at Lapis, he opened his mouth.

He recalled the wonderful smile Lapis showed him in the end.

And that place.

He recalled that place, everyone was waiting in.

That place, where he was always greeted.

"I will put everything into this strike so that I can go back."

"…………"

"In order to come back to where I belong——I will cut you down."

That was Kusanagi Takeru's wish.

That was Kusanagi Takeru's hope.

For comrades' sake.

For little sister's sake.

For his own sake.

And——for the one that's watching over him from somewhere, his partner's sake.

"I see. That hope of yours is very much like you... I look forward to crushing it."

With a smile on his face, clad in the darkness, Haunted set up the sword.

Takeru returned the sword into the sheath and lowered his hips.

"............Let's end this."

He proposed,

"............I'll do that."

And Haunted nodded.

"Your despair."

"Your hope."

""——I'll sever it here!""

Touching the handle with his fingertips, Takeru quietly instructed.

"Lapis... 《Twilight Enchantment》."

The blade was lit with flames inside the sheath.

Up until now he never felt heat from that flame. He thought it was just magic and a power to hunt the heretics.

He felt it to be very warm now. Similar to Lapis' hand touching his cheek, soft and warm...

Takeru closed his eyes and recalled.

Demon's Heart did not bestow madness. It removed useless thoughts, leaving only the will to fight.

The will to fight. The reason for fighting.

A goal and action.

In order to return to where he belonged——he would slash.

The sound disappeared, his body's sensations disappeared.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the delayed world.

The world has slowed down and was left behind.

He saw the particles of light. Everything and all has stopped moving.

In the middle of it, Takeru took a step forward.

Together with his partner he aimed forward.

He wasn't chasing after the light. His goal wasn't light.

The particles of light resumed its movement and started to flow again.

Holding the sword behind Haunted, Takeru looked at the platoon's room.

I'll return to that place.

That was his wish.

My...

Partner's...

"Let's go back, together."

Takeru who had pulled out the sword from the sheath, had saw the door open beyond light.

After Hyakki Yakou's invasion had stopped, the ocean of demons filling the entire capital had turned into ash and the giant tree had died then fell onto the ground. Because the Hyakki Yakou which filled the ground had become ash, they confirmed land subsidence in various places. There was not even a remnant left of the capital.

An entire night has passed since Hyakki Yakou's invasion. Ever since Ootori Sougetsu disappeared along with Kusanagi Takeru, the 35th platoon made survival their highest priority.

Ouka collected Kiseki who had lost her consciousness and leaped on the helicopter Usagi and Ikaruga were on, retreating from the collapsing tree.

Afterwards, Heretic Alliance had gathered at the school site's location, then gave Ouka and others treatment. The one who received most serious injuries was Mari. While exhausted from her battle with Mother Goose, she had the control of her soul deprived and battled against Ouka. Furthermore, she exhausted her magic power the second time by giving it to Takeru. It wouldn't be strange if a normal witch died because of that.

Although Ouka and others weren't that worried, when the Seelie in charge and a healing sorcerer said that "A long-term medical treatment is necessary, but her life isn't in danger.", they were all relieved.

Ouka, Usagi and Ikaruga have remained in the first-aid tent until the morning broke out, comforting each other.

None of them said anything. Each of them was thinking of what to do from now on. Not knowing anything about what happened to the world's destruction at Sougetsu's hands, they were left behind by Takeru.

What should we tell Kiseki? What will happen to Kiseki from now on?

We... the world... they knew nothing of what's ahead.

The three comforted each other. If they are together, it would somehow work out. Same as always, they would combine their strength and open the path. To think so, they needed time.

At the very least, until the morning...

——Hoshijiro Nagaru has returned just thirty minutes earlier.

"That explosion just now... can it be...?"

Riding a four-wheeler they borrowed from beside the first-aid tent, with Ouka and Usagi riding with her, Ikaruga suddenly stepped on her brakes as they were assaulted by a sudden shaking and a flash of light.

"......!!"

"Ootori!"

Ignoring Usagi who tried to restrain her, Ouka jumped off from the passenger's seat and started running. She ran in the direction of that explosion. Ikaruga and Usagi too, chased her from behind.

Nagaru said this.

『"I can't guarantee anything, but go check this location... If he still remains human, then maybe..."』

She said that there is faint hope. Ouka and others had no choice but to cling onto that hope.

Jumping over the rubble, despite having her legs sinking in the ash she desperately proceeded forward.

"Takeru...! Takeru...!!"

Calling his name, she aimed for the explosion's hypocenter.

Ahead of where she arrived, there was an enormous crater.

Stopping at the edge of the crater she looked around.

It was an empty scenery. With everything destroyed in there, it turned into an endless world of ash.

In the center of the crater... Ouka found a certain object.

At the bottom of the crater where a mountain of ash was piling up.

Pierced in on top of that mountain there were two swords.

A black and slender one, and an azure katana.

The two swords were crossed as they were stuck in ash.

"........................No..."

Ouka fell on her knees and squinted. Grasping ash she formed a fist with her hand.

Frustration and sorrow overwhelmed her. Her tears fell to ash and black points spread on the ground.

He must have came back. He did what he had to do and came back to this world.

That truth was her only salvation.

The place he belonged to, was here.

Even if his body was gone, his soul must have returned back here.

That's why, stop crying. Ouka told herself.

——That moment.

Something wriggled inside the mountain of ash and it collapsed.

Ouka raised her face in surprise.

The ash fell from the mountain, it was raising up from the inside.

Ouka pulled out a gun from her belt.

"...nhh..."

Aiming at the mountain of ash she breathed in.

Which is it?

Which sword will he hold?

A man completely painted over with ash appeared from inside the mountain. Getting on one knee he shook his head covered in white ash and extended the palm of his right hand.

And the man——had grasped his beloved sword with that hand.

Epilogue - The 35th Test Platoon

——The Second Witch Hunt War.

Although five years have passed ever since it has ended, it was still clearly unknown what was that war about. While it was true that witches have invaded, the borderline invasion could be called just a preliminary encounter and was reported to be an arbitrary action taken by the extremist "Pureblood Party".

The reason details of this war were obscured, was all because of the magical organism called Hyakki Yakou. It has come to light that the Inquisition was hiding it and its use in war has been highly criticized. Furthermore, Inquisition has decided to remain silent as to what Hyakki Yakou happened to it afterwards.

With the disappearance of the Chairman Ootori Sougetsu and the direct attack on the main branch by Hyakki Yakou, nearly all Inquisition's executives have been gone. Inquisition's functionality has become paralyzed for months, and with the reveal that an enormous country of witches existed within the Sanctuary, there was a considerable confusion born inside old Japan. People were frightened by witches' invasion and lived while carrying the wounds dealt to them by Hyakki Yakou.

The ones who rebuilt the Inquisition, was a group calling themselves "Heretic Alliance". After losing majority of their power, Inquisition was unable to refuse their cooperation.

Thanks to the efforts of the head of this organization composed of both Inquisitors and witches, Hoshijiro Nagaru, and EXE's captain Kurogane Hayato, it was possible to reconstruct the damaged areas and form an armistice treaty with the country of witches. Although it wasn't made public what were the circumstances behind it, but the treaty was signed as soon as possible.

Two years after the war, a genuine diplomacy exchange with the country of witches has begun.

The Heretic Alliance has finished its role and dismantled for the time being. Although just temporarily, Hoshijiro Nagaru has been appointed the chairman of the Inquisition. After revising multiple discriminatory laws towards witches, even now, together with the vice chairman Kurogane Hayato she worked hard on stabilizing.

And——the ones who knew the truth of that war were now...

* * *

"Ouka-chan... anpan again?"

Watching Ouka stuff her bag full of anpan, Yoshimizu Akira supported her chin with her hand on top of the register and smiled bitterly.

Peeking out from behind the paper back, Ouka nodded with "yeah".

"If you eat without thinking of nutrition balance you'll ruin your boooody."

Making a good-natured smile, Akira pressed on the register's button.

With the paper bag put aside for the moment, Ouka took out four bottles of milk and one iced coffee from the refrigerator next to the register and put them on top of the counter.

"It's all right. I'm taking supplements to cover the shortage of nutrients. Rather, if you take away anpan and milk from me, I'll probably get sick."

"Well, in any case, it's a great help for us."

Staring at Akira who proceeded with input on the register she wasn't used to and scratched her cheek at the same time, Ouka smiled gently.

"So? How's it going?"

"With the store? It's been just three months, we aren't on track yet."

"That too, but I meant your body. Anything changed?"

Asked by Ouka, Akira made a broad smile.

"Nope. I still need regular checkups, but thanks to Ikaruga-chan it's become pretty much the same as that of a human. There's no need to worry."

"...I see. That's good."

And, as if recalling something, Ouka raised her index finger.

"Speaking of which, your husband's been healthy?"

"He's in the back, want to meet him?"

Ouka thought about that suggestion, but ended up shaking her head with a "no".

"I can imagine him chasing me out with a sour look, so I'll pass."

"Ahaha, certainly. For some reason he can't bear seeing former 35th platoon's members at work, doesn't he～."

"It can't be helped considering his personality. Still... I didn't think he would really end up becoming a baker."

"He himself thinks so too."

Seeing Akira make a wry smile, Ouka also made a similar one.

Even now after five years, Yoshimizu Akira's ponytail was unchanged. As always, she was a friendly and charming girl. The bakery's apron suited her very well.

Yoshimizu Akira has voluntarily withdrew from AntiMagic Academy after the war (with that said, the school hasn't resumed its activity until over a year later), and had married Kirigaya Kyouya.

Kyouya has been through a lot, but once he fulfilled his revenge he quit the school and separated from Nero. Once Kyouya has lost his desire for revenge he also lost the right to own Nero, also Nero had no merit in continuing contract with him either. Now, Nero was waiting for a new contractor while kept by the Inquisition. While that was supposed to be the case, she from time to time appeared inside the bakery.

The reason was Kyouya's current occupation.

A baker. Although it was a splendid profession, previously, no one would imagine Kyouya becoming one. Apparently when he has finished his revenge, he has started looking for a new way of life together with Akira and they started talking about how he disguised as a baker together with the 35th platoon, amused, Akira suddenly proposed "let's open a bakery!".

Half-forcing Kyouya she made him get a cooking license and after three years of practicing, they managed to open a bakery.

And so, Kyouya who has once disguised as an old baker, has become a real baker. Since he was a serious person at the base he carried through with what he has decided on, but apparently he has been dominated quite a bit by his wife. Interested in seeing Kyouya in such state, Nero sometimes appeared inside the store.

Recalling Kyouya's appearance during their intrusion on the critical point, Ouka burst into laughter even now.

"...Whoops, not good. It's time, I need to hurry."

"Got work today as well? Sounds harsh."

"No, I have an errand before work today. We are celebrating a friend's school admission."

When Ouka said so, Akira recalled something and went "Ohh, right." then looked outside the window with a smile.

Cherry blossoms were in bloom. It was the fifth spring ever since that war.

"It's already spring～."

"Yeah, time passes fast."

Ouka received the paper bag from Akira and passed money to her. Akira waved her hand and sent off Ouka with a smile.

"Thanks. Be careful on your way."

"Yeah. Greet your husband from me."

"I'll tell him to go meet you guys from time to time."

When Ouka opened the door, the bell sounded and cherry blossom's petals carried by wind grazed her skin.

Taking a look at her watch, she started to walk briskly.

Five years have passed. Ouka has graduated from AntiMagic Academy, was now an Inquisitor in "Dullahan" and has returned to The Zeroth Extermination Riot Police "EXE".

She was 21 this year. Speaking of what changed about her, it probably would be just her height. The fact she has grown very tall was one of her recent problems, but majority of them were caused by the fact she has become object of envy. Fortunately, her chest size hasn't changed that much.

Her hair has grown longer than it was before. Although she was scolded by her boss, Oonogi Kanata, telling her to cut it because they were in the way, but she couldn't get herself to cut them.

Ouka's clothes have changed from the academy's uniform to EXE's black uniform. Since she always wore a skirt at the academy it took her time to get used to new uniform's pants, but now she has grown more accustomed now to it than to her own clothes.

"Not good... I've ended up being late."

She climbed up the slope and approached cherry blossom trees leading to the top of the hill.

Although it was hated by the students who went to school by a bicycle, beyond this slope which was a well-known cherry blossom viewing spot by locals, there was the new AntiMagic Academy.

Still, while it was new, it had hardly changed from before. It was reconstructed in the very same way except for some inhumane facilities. Ever since the diplomatic exchange with the country of witches began, the laws against magic have relaxed and some people have started considering the phrase "antimagic" as a discriminatory term, therefore it wasn't used much.

However, to Ouka and the others "Inquisition's Training Facility" naming felt very stiff, so they used the name they were familiar with.

It has been a while since she has entered it from the front gate.

As she fell into slight nostalgia as she climbed up the slope,

"——You're having anpan again? Seriously, why aren't you fat yet?"

Hearing a voice come from the side of the avenue, Ouka furrowed her eyebrows and turned towards where the voice has come from.

"Heck, aren't you late? You seriously turn up late because you had to stop by bakery?"

A familiar hat and a scarf, determined expression and voice.

Nikaido Mari. An ex-member of the 35th platoon (provisional) who fought along their side, was waiting for Ouka while leaning her back on the cherry blossom tree.

Her appearance hasn't changed much either. She grew taller just slightly, but her clothing was unchanged. Even after turning 21 she maintained her mysterious fixation and continued wearing a hat and a muffler all year long. As expected, she stopped tying her hair into twintails at this age, but Ouka sourly reprimanded her every time they met, saying that her mini-skirt is tempting the students too much.

"I don't remember arranging to meet with you...!"

"It's not like I was waiting for yooou. You were late so Usagi-chan asked me to take a look what's going on."

Being told so, Ouka could not respond too strongly. Groaning, she honestly apologized "sorry, I'm late". Mari put her hand to her mouth and laughed, then rotating her index finger in a circle she walked up next to Ouka.

"Well～ I don't mind forgiving you～♪, *Mari-chan-sensei* famous for being gentle, pretty and beautiful～♪. She bewitches the students with her adult charms～♪."

"You're as annoying as ever. Even after becoming a teacher you didn't change. Still flat as ever."

"I-I'm not flat!! You too have completely none of EXE's dignity and still look like a student!"

"Unlike you I properly grew since then! I grew taller!"

"Are you a kid?! You've just gotten old! It's matter of time until those boobs of yours start sagging!"

"I-I'm not old! They aren't sagging and my skin is bursting with youth!"

"I'm also full of youth! And I'm not sagging!"

"That's because you have nothing to sag to start with!"

Fighting as usual, the two stomped lively as they walked up the slope, their shoulders bumping against one another. Since it was the time to go to school, students looked at the two and commented "Mari-chan-sensei is quarreling with the person from EXE again" while laughing.

Because witch admission system has been introduced in the earnest, Mari was currently acting as a teacher of magic. After the law was revised, witches were allowed admission and currently, the number of witches among students has passed over two hundred. Mari has ended up taking care of all of them.

At first, the witches felt a little ashamed inside the school, but thanks to Mari they were accepted to a fairly good extent by normal students.

Thanks to her appearance and personality, splendid clumsiness and strong sense of justice, Mari was very popular among students and was affectionately nicknamed "Mari-chan-sensei".

She often bragged about that, but from Ouka's perspective it seemed like she was being made fun of with that nickname.

Of course, even after the law has been revised she was not permitted to remove the magic power controlling collar, Gleipnir. Even now Mari had a collar on her neck. However, by Mari's own suggestion, Gleipnirs were no longer unrefined metal collars but ones with cute decorations and allowing to breathe the user well. Gleipnirs were no longer treated as symbols of discrimination as they used to.

In the past five years, the era has changed drastically.

Before Ouka and Mari entered the school, they first entered the basement in the back of Inquisition's headquarters.

Unlike in the past, it wasn't dim or eerie, but this place was the underground the witch isolation district that was called a forbidden area and the innermost prison.

Currently the witches' accommodation facilities were smaller than before and thanks to diplomatic exchange with the country of witches, Gleipnir's performance has increased. As a result, Iron Maidens were no longer used.

Instead, Inquisition used the extra space remaining for something else.

Those few who knew of the inner workings of the Inquisition, called it Hyakki Yakou apartment.

The elevator's chime sounded, signaling that Ouka and Mari arrived at the deepest part.

This was the experiment control room. In the space spreading behind glass wall, there was something like a huge blast furnace in the center.

There, was a single woman typing on a three-dimensional keyboard.

It was a woman in a white suit. She was crossing her legs as she typed on the keyboard, picked up a mint candy lying on top of the table and threw it inside her mouth.

Her black hair was trimmed into a bob cut and her legs crossed on top of a chair. There was a mole underneath her eye and beside her lips.

The woman raised a hand when she noticed Ouka and Mari.

"——So you're here, spinster duo."

""You're no better!""

Hearing Suginami Ikaruga greet them in the usual manner, the two simultaneously retorted.

"If you're going to say that, that applies to all of ex-Small Fry Platoon's members! Heck, we're still 21! Full of youth!"

"I'm not a spinster! I'm just waiting to be chosen!"

"You'll miss your chance to marry if you wait for that good-for-nothing. Your twenties will be gone before you notice, so you better hurry and search for new love."

Hearing Ikaruga's calm argument the two growled in frustration.

Staring as she stretched grandly and yawned, Ouka took a look around the control room.

"I heard that we're gathering here first... but it's just us three, isn't it?"

"It's because you were late. I'm having Usagi help me out with my work so she'll be back soon. Also, that guy went to catch my kid first."

Hearing that, Ouka furrowed her eyebrows.

"The official procedures are complete, but she's still reluctant to enroll...?"

"Well, "I don't need to go to school"～ she said and wouldn't listen to me. She ran away somewhere when I wasn't looking today."

Troubling, isn't it. Ikaruga said and sighed. Ouka took out anpan and ice coffee she bought at the bakery and placed them in front of Ikaruga.

Ikaruga put the cold coffee against her forehead and took anpan in her hand.

"Thanks for refreshments, it's a great help since I haven't eaten since yesterday."

"You sound busy... as expected of chief administrator. It must be hard to respond to all the requests from above."

"Yeah, well. On top of that I'm a single mother with an adolescent daughter, y'know? Of course I have it hard."

"...Shouldn't you better marry someone already?"

"Unfortunately〜, I'm unexpectedly devoted."

She separated the coffee from her forehead and opening the pulltab, she took a sip of the bitter liquid.

Mari took a look around the control room and sat down on the chair next to Ikaruga.

"How about you employ someone already? It must he hard to take care of that girl all alone."

"No. We can't trust anyone. Even if I'm allowed to, he won't allow anyone else touch her. Of course, she herself won't allow it either."

"A-an ultimate siscon-brocon pair, huh?"

"It's good that Hoshijiro and Kurogane Hayato are suppressing the higher-ups, but since I said I'll do it, I have no choice but to carry through with it. Although, it would help me lots if you could spare some time and help me out, y'know?"

"Ahh, well, keep up the good work♪."

Kyaha☆, added Mari and saluted, making Ikaruga kick her chair lightly.

That moment, the elevator's chime sounded in the control room.

When everyone's gaze turned towards the elevator, from inside of it,

"Ah, you are finally here! You are late, LATE!"

Huffing in anger all of a sudden, Saionji Usagi appeared in front of everyone.

Her semi-long wavy hair has turned into long wavy hair. Her height hasn't increased at all. She was wearing a black EXE uniform, same as Ouka. Her impressive, huge boobs were still going strong. They used to be smaller than Ikaruga's, but they grew even more and now she had the biggest boobs in the ex-Small Fry Platoon. Since she has been over twenty years old they thought her boobs won't get any bigger, so it honestly suspicious.

Thanks to Usagi's skill in sniping she joined EXE this month and has become Ouka's co-worker. Although she was still part of the reserve, but her ability to pierce through a single point defense was unusual even among members of EXE. With her achievements during the war, she has been scouted by the current EXE captain, Oonogi Kanata, for her skill.

Ouka stroked her own head with one hand and bowed slightly.

"Sorry. I simply overslept."

Hearing Ouka's reason for being late, Usagi was unable to maintain her anger.

"W-woah? That, that's rare. So even you oversleep sometimes? When I am late to work it is you who usually is angry."

"Mm... well, it's cause I'm sortie every day. Although restoration progresses, because of it the movement against the old order has grow more intense. You will be sortied soon too, Saionji."

After Ouka apologized and explained the circumstances, Usagi learned of what's ahead of her and started to tense up. Although she overcame her stage fright over a series of battles and become a top-level sniper, Usagi hadn't been in actual battle ever since war ended so it had returned slightly.

Well, despite that Usagi will probably manage once it gets to battle.

"Speaking of which, where's Kiseki? Wasn't she with Saionji?"

"? She was. After all, we got on the elevator togeth——"

**ting*

The elevator's chime rang. Once again everyone looked at the elevator. The door opened and from inside, appeared Kusanagi Kiseki, wearing AntiMagic Academy's uniform.

"...uuhh... uhhh〜..."

Squirming embarrasedly she walked towards them.

Everyone except for Ikaruga greeted Kiseki while astonished.

"Why are you appearing late despite coming together with me?"

"U-um... uh... W-when Usagi-san... left I pressed... button to open... you see. I tried to, but..."

Seeing Kiseki curl up, Usagi's closed her eyes contently.

"...You pressed the button to close. Then when you tried to open it in a hurry, you pressed the button that took the elevator to another floor."

"...augh..."

It must have been a bull's-eye as Kiseki drooped her shoulders dejected.

Usagi pat her shoulder to cheer her up. While Kiseki tried to desperately hide her face behind her bangs, Ikaruga stared at her coldly.

"Cluts."

Ikaruga frankly said the truth to Kiseki.

"Y-you're horrible, *Ikaruga-oneesama...!* You don't have to... say it so clearly... and why isn't it at least "klutz" but "cluts"... uuuuhh..."

"Clearly or not, how many times have you done that already? It's about time you memorized this facility's structure. Don't make trouble by breaking through the security and coming out again.

Why do you think did I make you wear AntiMagic Academy's uniform? It's so that you aren't suspicious when you end up clutsing outside, got it?"

"B-but... but...!"

"No buts. Memorize it if you want to continue living like this."

"............I'm sorryy."

Kiseki obediently accepted Ikaruga's sermon and drooped her shoulders. Ouka and Mari made same complacent expressions as Usagi previously had as they enjoyed Kiseki's klutziness.

To think that this girl——was the SS-class designated dangerous Hyakki Yakou who had destroyed the entirety of capital and was responsible for countless people gone missing. They couldn't believe it as they watched her now.

However, it was the truth. Kiseki right here, was THAT Kiseki.

Nothing changed about her.

She has still remained as Hyakki Yakou.

"Wellll, don't be so hard on her～. You know well that Kiseki-chan didn't meant to do anything bad."

"M-Mari-san... y-you really... are so kind..."

As Mari backed Kiseki up, Kiseki joined her hands in front of her with a sparkle in her eyes. Beside them, Ikaruga crossed her legs and crunched the mint candy inside her mouth.

"She'll just get conceited if you spoil her. I know this girl's real nature best of all."

"! Uuu, Ikaruga-oneesamaaa～～."

This time Kiseki turned towards Ikaruga with tears in her eyes. Her expressions changed really quickly. In the past it was impossible to imagine this from Kiseki, Ouka thought and smiled wryly.

Ever since Kiseki shared "feelings" together with them, Kiseki opened her heart to the platoon members alone. She has become cheerful and less shy than before.

Although she was able to act freely as long as she didn't leave outside, it wasn't because she was no longer Hyakki Yakou. Even now the demon curse remained in her body and when it exceeded the allowable amount, Hyakki Yakou overflowed from inside her.

However, currently Kiseki was able to control Hyakki Yakou to a certain extent. Hyakki Yakou was a "power" fulfilling her wishes. It was because she wished for destruction that Hyakki Yakou was eating the world. Hyakki Yakou was a mirror reflecting her soul. That's why as long as she doesn't desire destruction from her heart, Hyakki Yakou will not try to destroy the world.

Currently, Ikaruga has become responsible for all research on Hyakki Yakou. She was given this position because she was the one to propose a "way to control Hyakki Yakou" to Hoshijiro Nagaru and Kurogane Hayato.

Her proposal was very much like that of a mad scientist and eccentric.

『"Put an explosive Gleipnir on Takeru's neck and make it so that if Hyakki Yakou takes somebody's life it automatically explodes."』

She had made this proposal very seriously. It took advantage of the fact that Hyakki Yakou would not act as long as Kiseki did not desire something.

Takeru dying alone was the worst possible ending for Kiseki. That's why it made sense. That is why she would wish from the bottom of her heart "not to kill anyone".

That experiment has been going on well so far, but not all of the new Inquisition's executives were convinced of it. It was too dangerous.

What overruled the executives' concerns, was what Hayato said.

『"If we don't accept this proposal, Hyakki Yakou will end up destroying humanity. It's something we humanity, cannot control."』

And he was absolutely right. He explained that quarantine, torture, and pulling her away from her brother was a suicidal act.

It was because Ootori Sougetsu sought destruction that he took traditional measures.

No matter how dreadful Hyakki Yakou was, that would only lead to destruction.

『"Treat this proposal as negotiations for peace between humanity and Hyakki Yakou."』

In this manner, the vice-chairman of the current Inquisition board, Kurogane Hayato had forcibly convinced the executives.

Like that, Ikaruga conducted research on Kiseki while she voluntarily released Hyakki Yakou in regular manner. The blast furnace was used to eliminate the excess to a permissible level. Even now, Ikaruga focused on studying Hyakki Yakou and had subordinates in both inner and outer world gathering information about the "demon curse".

Of course, Ikaruga also thought that continuing this forever was dangerous. The ultimate goal of her work was erasing the Hyakki Yakou from inside Kiseki's body.

This was something only Ikaruga could do. Fortunately, Kiseki idolized Ikaruga.

When Hyakki Yakou went out of control and they shared feelings, Kiseki was struck by Ikaruga's words and heart completely devoid of lies. After Ikaruga has been made in charge of her the time they spent together increased and Kiseki started to adore Ikaruga to the point of calling her "Ikaruga-oneesama".

Seeing this, Ouka, Mari, Usagi, not even her own brother could hide surprise.

"You have no right to call me your sister. It'll be a whole another story if you agree on me having Kusanagi, though."

"——Ah, no, you can't."

The way she seemed to be crying one moment, in order to completely deny Ikaruga's words with a wide smile was a proof that Kiseki hardly changed.

As usual, her love for her brother was strong. Even though she was told by him that he wants her by his side as a little sister, and was rejected as a romantic partner, Kiseki did not give up.

As she spend her days together with her brother, she said this.

『"Kiseki is thinking... that as long as there is love, the fact Onii-chan is onii-chan doesn't matter."』

...And remained as always. It could be said she's turned worse since she's turned honest.

Also——for some reason, Ouka was hated by Kiseki same as before.

Actually... we were supposed to have made up though. I thought she accepted me.

Squinting, Ouka watched as Kiseki spoke to Mari and Usagi yet wouldn't even greet her, and was a little hurt.

Kiseki had a sense of guilt after the people whom she killed as Hyakki Yakou. She seemed to act thoughtless, but it wasn't like she felt nothing. Possibly, she discussed these things with her brother and showed him weakness.

In any case, whether Kiseki had a sense of guilt or not, she did wish to live.

Ouka thought it was something to rejoice about. The fact that Kiseki talked with her comrades normally, made Ouka happy.

And the fact that the man who bet his own life on making this situation possible was able to make his dream come true, was what made her more happy than anything.

While Ouka stared at the four talk, including Kiseki, a call had come to Ikaruga's mobile phone. Interrupting the conversation she put it against her ear.

After exchanging two, three words, Ikaruga ended the call.

"He says he found her. It's time to go. I'm uneasy with just him being there."

Ikaruga stood up from the chair and stretched.

Ouka too, stood up along with a small sigh.

A hefty amount of time has passed. Just as Ikaruga said, it felt uneasy to leave everything to him.

Also, they wanted to send her off together.

"Well then, let's go."

Today was the admission ceremony for AntiMagic Academy.

* * *

He walked down a nostalgic corridor.

It was a wooden old school building. It's been years since he last was here.

"It's been three years since graduation, after all..."

While recalling that time——Kusanagi Takeru made a nostalgic smile.

A lot happened back in this place, really. It was too harsh to be called bitterness of youth, but it was still important place to Takeru.

AntiMagic Academy's test platoon building. It was built in the same place as the one in previous school building and the same situation was reproduced on purpose.

It was an old-fashioned building made of wood. Every time he walked, the floorings sounded.

Takeru loved this sound.

"This place is great after all..."

Squinting, Takeru recalled the atmosphere from back then. That's when he was suddenly kicked in the shin.

"Oww!"

As he screamed, he could tell that the culprit who kicked him has started running away.

Takeru activated Soumatou and catching the culprit by her collar he raised her up.

The culprit caught by the neck wasn't tall so her legs didn't reach the floor and she flailing them in the air.

"L-let go! Kana... Kana is not going there!!"

It was a blue-haired girl with long ears.

Her name was Kanaria. She was wearing AntiMagic Academy's uniform and was an actual half-wood elf. Starting from this year she entered AntiMagic Academy and would spend her daily life at this shitty school.

Kusanagi Takeru who was now 21, smiled bitterly while holding her collar.

"You promised, right? If you want me to teach you the secret art you have to go to school."

"Kana didn't promise anything! Kana doesn't need to study! She has knowledge in her head!"

"Heck, you're single digit of age, dammit. Kids gotta go to school."

As Takeru made a bitter smile, Kanaria hanging like a cat glared at him.

"Then why, why does it have to be AntiMagic Academy?!"

"That's because this is the only school so far that would accept an elf. I'm also doubtful of your admission here, but well, as far as your body goes I guess you are of about high school age."

"I object!"

"Give up. Admittance papers are were submitted. You're already a student here."

He tried to calm her down and as a result, Kanaria gave up and relaxed her body.

While thinking she really was like a cat, he hit Kanaria's back prompting her to walk down the corridor.

"Well. I'm not one to talk, but you've quite the communication disorder. Though it's not like don't understand you're anxious."

"Kana isn't anxious or anything..."

"In Magic Academy you didn't have friends either, right?"

"...uhh."

"It's a good opportunity, go deepen bonds with others. This school is perfect for that kind of thing."

No matter how much he emphasized on the school's good points, Kanaria continued to look aside.

Takeru exhaled and turned around the corner of the corridor.

When he did, he found it.

That door.

"Oh."

Takeru raised his voice. Standing in front of the door were Ouka, Usagi, Mari and Ikaruga. All four of them seemed to have been waiting for Kanaria and Takeru to come.

They approached the two.

"Cheers for good work, Takeru. Didn't she ran around quite a bit?"

"She even went as far as to use Soumatou and run away to the top of a mountain."

Ouka smiled wryly and called "c'mon" towards Kanaria who kept sulking.

"You'll be all right, Kana-chan～. Even Ouka managed to make comrades, it'll be easy peasy for you."

When Mari said that, Ouka mercilessly delivered a chop to her head. They came to encourage Kanaria and celebrate her admission, but ended up fighting right away.

"Kana-san's physical abilities are top-notch, so as long as she doesn't pick fights with others she will surely be accepted by everyone."

Usagi pat Kanaria's back twice.

Encouraged by Usagi, Kanaria lowered her eyebrows feeling a little uneasy.

Ikaruga placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right. Go. Waiting in there are your comrades."

Like a gentle mother, she pushed Kanaria's back, speaking with a soft voice.

"..............."

Timidly, Kanaria started walking towards the platoon's room.

Anxiously, displeased she stood in front of the door and looked at the plate.

『First Year, 35th Test Platoon』

That's what was written on the plate.

"Kanaria."

Called by name, she turned around.

Takeru raised one hand and smiled gently.

"Do your best. I know you can do it."

Receiving the last encouragement, Kanaria made a displeased expression and held the doorknob of the platoon room's door.

She slowly opened the door and fluorescent light has started leaking out from the inside.

Takeru and others watched Kanaria's back as she entered the room completely.

And when the door closed, everyone sighed with relief.

"Good grief... will she be okay?"

"W-who knows? Honestly... I have no idea."

"H-hmm... but, we were all right, so surely..."

"If she's to cry, she should leave it until she's back home. "Kana had enough!" she'll say. Well, that's also what's cute about her."

The five remained there for a moment and watched the platoon's door.

"...How nostalgic. Everything started inside there."

Everyone nodded in response to Takeru's words.

Then suddenly, Takeru looked at himself reflected in the corridor's window.

Compared to the past, he grew taller and his body build improved. His hair too, was slightly longer.

He wasn't wearing a green uniform, but EXE's black one. The emblem at his chest wasn't that of a test platoon. Back then he was a captain, but now Takeru was a vice-captain. Apparently becoming a vice-captain at age of 21 was something to be proud of. With that said, despite being a vice-captain, since he was related to Kiseki his position was *extremely special* and he rarely headed out into battle. The ones who took command were mainly Kanata and the other vice-captain, Ouka. His current trouble was that his body has been growing dull, all the desk work was harsh on him. In many ways he's been having a hard time.

Looking at it from that perspective... he thought that might have become an adult, but he hasn't changed that much.

"..........."

Once again he looked at the platoon room's door.

A lot of various things happened.

Painful things, sad things, fun things, and happy things.

All of it was jammed inside that room.

The memories of his comrades along with pain were packed inside there.

In the past, that place was irreplaceable to Takeru.

Now it has been handed down to the next generation. Although it felt lonely, he didn't think of returning back to those days. It was because of them of that time, that they of now were themselves.

Takeru and others now had a new place they belonged to. Their comrades also had their place they belonged to even though they walked separate paths, but Takeru and others remained here.

It was different from the one they had in the past, but this was their new place they belonged to.

"Now, it's about time we go. There's work again in the afternoon."

"Same here〜. Oh right, you guys, it's been a while so go eat lunch in the school cafeteria. There's a new menu and it's quite popular, too."

"Heeh, Western food? Or Japanese?"

"I want to go back and sleep... well, I'll accompany you."

While chatting, the four started walking down the corridor, heading for the school cafeteria.

"............"

Takeru stared at the platoon's room for a little longer, but eventually looked away from the door and towards the other four members.

——I'm always by your side.

"......!!"

Feeling like he heard a voice, Takeru turned around with strong momentum.

"............"

There was no one there.

Beyond the platoon room's door, he could only hear the loud voices of new small fry platoon's members.

Takeru exhaled lightly and... extended his hand towards the sword at his waist.

He touched the handle.

His azure-colored partner was together with him even now.

——I'll be always, forever by your side.

Takeru smiled and stroked the sword with affection.

"...Yeah, I know... Lapis."

He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

Takeru was now happy. And the one who attained him this happiness, was his precious partner.

He raised his head and turned around on his heel to chase after his comrades.

His precious place he belonged to, was always by his comrades' side.

Afterwords

Sougetsu: "To think I was a mid-boss."

And with that said, how was the last volume of "AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"? It has been a while, I'm Yanagimi Touki.

The main story ends here. Was it long? Was it short...? ...No, it was long, wasn't it. About four years? With just the main story volumes, there were thirteen of them. Including the short story volumes, fifteen in total (※One more to go). When I started this series I hadn't even the least idea it would end like this. I am deeply moved.

R-right. I was planning to write the afterword with author's thoughts about each character in this volume, as far as I'm concerned, there are four more pages left to write this time.

IT'S OVAH.

Rather, I should have started writing my thoughts about the series in previous volumes and just continued with this one. Well, let's leave the thoughts on characters to probably, the last volume which is the second short story collection volume, so look forward to that!

Although the AntiMagic Academy series has completed, I've had a fair share of fun and difficulties considering how long it continued. It's a work I've had the most points to reflect upon so far. I think it's not something everyone will like. I won't raise my hands and say "this is my masterpiece!" even if you force me to. Well, about whether I will continue as a writer – I think I won't write anything else... even if I thought so, I don't think that would actually happen. When I finish as series like this, I feel a little lonely. Of course I intend to do my best writing the next work, but as I recall the 35th platoon's members I feel like I'm dragging it out. I won't meet them again〜, kind of thing.

If among the readers there was even a single person who thinks the same I would be really happy, I feel sometimes. This series continued in quite serious mood, but half-forcefully I put some comical parts in. If the cool 35th platoon and comical 35th platoon remains in the corner of your hearts, there would be nothing that would make me happier.

Also everyone's boobies, too. Let's not forget the boobs. Big boobies, small boobies, nearly-nonexistent boobies, if you remember all the boobies I will definitely feel like I was saved. Earlier I wrote that I love this work though I can't say it was a masterpiece, but Usagi's boobies and character are my best boobies character so far. I can say it now, Usagi's boobies were totally based on my hobbies. Of course, small boobies and huge boobies are also my hobbies. I equally pour love into all boobies.

It's because they're my precious, dear boobies that I,

I would like you... just from time to time... to recall 35th platoon's boobies.

Yup. I think this is an afterword worthy of this series' final volume.

——With that said, it will continue for a little longer. In the second volume of 35th platoon's short story collection I plan to write a quite long short story. It will be related to Kiseki, sub-characters, and "what happened to that enemy?" things. And above all, I will properly write what happens to the 35th platoon afterwards. I'm really happy to be able to make a continuation of the epilogue! I look forward to it! Please look forward to it!

Well then, last volume's acknowledgements. The editors in charge of the series in whose care I was – S-sama (x2), Y-sama, K-sama. I was able to finish this work safely thanks to those people in charge of me. Next up, the illustrator Kippu-sama. I am really grateful for finishing up the characters to be beyond what I have imagined, I really appreciate it. Those who drew the comic version of the work, Hanao-sensei and Yasamura-sensei. Anime version's voice actors and everyone in the production staff. All of you from Fujimi Fantasia's editorial department who participated in this work.

I am grateful from the bottom of my heart. Although I might be an unreliable author, I did my best. Thank you very much. Thank you for your hard work!

Above all, to all you readers who have read this series.

Thank you very much——and, boobies.

I will send in the new work as soon as possible, please take care of it as well!

Well then, let's meet again! Yours, AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"! (Heck, it's long after all)

Yanagimi Touki